

## Addiction journals and the management of conflicts of interest

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Scientific journals are crucial for a critical and open exchange of new research findings and as guardians of the quality of science. Today, as policy makers increasingly justify decision-making with references to scientific evidence, and research articles form the basis for evidence for specific measures, journals also have an indirect responsibility for how political decisions will be shaped.

The general public has solid confidence in science and scientists (Castell et al., 2014). But in certain areas, with strong conflicting economic interests that are politically controversial, research results have been questioned and the trustworthiness of science has plummeted. Climate research is one obvious example (Neeley, 2013).

Addiction research—on tobacco, gambling, alcohol, drugs—is characterized by strong and conflicting interests, notably between welfare and public health on the one hand, and industry on the other. Efficient policies on the focus areas are not obviously popular, which may also result in political conflicts.

It is well documented how the tobacco industry for decades funded research aimed at producing uncertainty about the danger of smoking (e.g., Brandt, 2012). For alcohol, the transnational producers have invested resources in research that questions the relation between the total consumption and alcohol-related harms on a population level to prevent general regulations of the alcohol market (Adams, 2016). The international alcohol industry's strategy is to connect the industry in different ways to alcohol researchers in order to gain political credibility and a place at the decision-making table (Babor & Robaina, 2013). Concerning the pharmaceutical industry and research funding, in 2014 there was a debate in *The BMJ* on whether scientific journals should totally stop publishing trial results if the research was funded by the drug industry. The intention was to prevent the research body from becoming corrupted by the suppression of non-favorable results and the promotion of results that favor the industry's economic interests. A less radical strategy presented was a stricter steering of industry-funded research and transparency in the declaration of funding (Smith, Gøntzschke, & Groves, 2014).

Further, it has recently been documented how governments in some countries try to claim ownership of research and impose publication restrictions on publicly funded alcohol research (Kypri, 2015). In some cases, these embargos can be clearly linked to political interests that conflict with research results. It is not unlikely that, with a growing role for populist movements in many countries, the conflicts between governments and addiction researchers will increase.

The definition of a publication-relevant conflict of interest (COI) by the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) is this: "COI exists when a participant in the publication process (author, peer reviewer, or editor) has a competing interest that could unduly influence (or be reasonably seen to do so) his or her responsibilities in the publication process . . . academic honesty, unbiased conduct and reporting of research, and integrity of decisions or judgments" (2009). This definition comes close to that of the Farmington Consensus (1997), developed and undersigned by the International Society of Addiction Journal Editors (ISAJE).

It is difficult to find a researcher, or for that matter an editor or reviewer, who is totally unaffected by other considerations than the search for truth. But, as the WAME document states, "[h]aving a competing interest does not, in itself, imply wrongdoing. However, it constitutes a problem when competing interests could unduly influence (or be reasonably seen to do so) one's responsibilities in the publication process."

WAME reminds us that not all research that is funded, for instance, by the industry is automatically flawed or biased. In fact, most researchers with industry funding would argue that their research is not at all influenced by this fact. But, as the WAME document goes on to note, "[i]f COI is not managed effectively, it can cause authors, reviewers, and editors to make decisions that, consciously or unconsciously, tend to serve their competing interests at the expense of their responsibilities in the publication process, thereby distorting the scientific enterprise. This consequence of COI is especially dangerous when it is not immediately apparent to others." Transparency and

declaration of (potential) conflicts is a minimum requirement.

Notably, if the industry has a research strategy, as we know is the case with the tobacco and alcohol industries, declaration of industry funding is not only important to inform the reader about a possibly influenced perspective of the individual author of a text; it is also important that this funding is declared to identify at an aggregated level how industry funding possibly influences the whole body of research. This is particularly important for systematic reviews that may be used for decision-making.

The requirements to declare a COI should be an integral part of all serious addiction journals today. It is an important part of efforts to preserve the trust in research and scientific integrity and to prevent bias in research. COI declarations do not of course eliminate the possibilities that individual scientists will manipulate their data or interpret or present their findings in a biased way. And there is always room for interpretations of what constitutes a COI. A challenge for journals is to require COI declarations that are perceived as neither too detailed nor so unspecific that they miss conflicts of obvious importance (e.g., Mäkelä & Stenius, 2007).

So far, journals have largely concentrated their attention on financial interests, particularly those linked to industry financing of research. More recently, another focus has been on suppression or control over publications by research funders, including governments. This is also the case in the ISAJE's COI and transparency declaration model, which recommends that authors should declare funding sources for the works and constraints on publishing, as well as competing interests, both financial and non-financial.

COI policies must be based on empirical evidence about the problems they have caused. These problems have and will change. Consequently COI journal policies will have to be constantly updated. The future will show if there also will be an increasing demand for transparency regarding non-financial conflicts of interest.

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