

## **Editorial Conflicts of Interest and Problems Relating to the Correction of Scholarly Error**

Despite the often-repeated, rhetorical phrase, “Science is self-correcting”, there are various obstacles to the correction of scholarly error. These include conflicts of interest among scholars. And as corporate financial ties to universities become more widespread and entrenched, conflict of interest has become an increasingly major problem.

One very serious aspect of conflict of interest involves scholars, recognized experts in their fields, who have financial ties to large, powerful drug companies. At the same time, they might serve as editors or members of editorial boards of the leading journals in their academic disciplines, and as members of Advisory Committees for government agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In addition to editorial responsibilities, these scholars might also serve as secret peer review referees who recommend which scholarly articles should be published or rejected.

With the recall of many drugs from the market because of dangerous (even lethal) side effects, it becomes obvious that many scholarly errors occur in the field of medicine, with long periods of time, in many cases, before the errors are corrected. These medicines received FDA approval, but as Sheldon Krimsky [2003] has pointed out, many scholars on FDA committees have conflicts of interest. For instance, regarding one study, he writes,

USA Today reported that 'more than half of the experts hired to advise the government on the safety and effectiveness of medicine have financial relationships with the pharmaceutical companies that will be helped or hurt by their decisions. [p. 96]

In general, scholars are not eager to publicize their specific conflicts of interest. Some Internet study organizations, including VERACARE, and the Integrity in Science Watch Database, compile and discuss such conflict of interest information. From these sources, it becomes possible to document substantial editorial conflicts of interest situations in many specific fields of medicine, ranging from HIV-AIDS research to bipolar psychiatric studies, and to cancer research.

A recent case, discussed in the February 4, 2008 report of Integrity in Science Watch, with the title "NEJM Reviewer with Conflicts Leaked Damaging Study to Drug Firm," seems particularly significant. According to this report, New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM, a prestigious scholarly journal owned by the Massachusetts Medical Society), received a manuscript, submitted for publication by Steven Nissen, which was, in effect, a negative discussion of the drug Avandia, made by GlaxoSmithKline. The manuscript was sent to Steven M. Haffner for peer review. Haffner had strong financial ties to GlaxoSmithKline, “receiving at least 75,000 dollars in fees since 1999 [...]”. Haffner sent a copy of the manuscript to a scientist at GlaxoSmithKline, Alexander Cobitz, “giving GlaxoSmithKline time to prepare a public response”.

It turns out that the NEJM editor-in-chief, Jeffrey Drazen, has, according to the Integrity in Science database, financial ties with many drug companies, including GlaxoSmithKline as well. This situation has an ironic twist. Krimsky [2003] lauds and commends NEJM as the scientific journal taking the lead in dealing with conflict of interest situations. He states that it had been “at the vanguard of setting ethical standards in publication [...]” (p. 172) Authors of manuscripts submitted for publication in NEJM are supposed to reveal conflicts of interest related to the

contents of the manuscript. But, based on the contents of “NEJM Reviewer with Conflicts Leaked Damaging Study to Drug Firm”, it does not seem that similar revelations of conflicts of interest are demanded of the journal's secret peer review referees. Nor of their editors, for that matter.

Among the academic rhetoric relating to peer review, one of the main claims is that peer review helps provide “quality control” for studies that are published. In the NEJM-Haffner case, however, it seems that, more than quality control, peer review tended to help provide damage control for a specific drug company.

## References

KRIMSKY S. (2003). *Science in the Private Interest: Has the Lure of Profits Corrupted Biomedical Research?*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield

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