

(5.1) Disclosures by study investigators

A colleague has just submitted a manuscript on which you are a co-author that reports findings related to a new approach for performing CT-guided tumor biopsies. Upon submission, you receive an e-mail from the journal asking you to disclose any conflicts of interest related to the work. In the past year, you served on an advisory committee for a major manufacturer of CT equipment, although you were not paid for these services, the CT manufacturer is not the vendor of the biopsy device currently under investigation, and you have recently ended this advisory relationship. You thus are unsure whether this role needs to be provided to the journal. How shall you proceed?

Commentary

Conflicts of interest have the potential to impact author's professional judgment and thereby bias the outcomes of their work. As transparency regarding authors' conflicts of interest is critical for maintaining the public's confidence in the integrity of biomedical research, stakeholders expect that journals will obtain and manage potential conflicts in a reliable fashion. Nonetheless, the obligation to responsibly disclose all relevant conflicts ultimately falls upon the authors. Authors should disclose relationships that are relevant to the submitted work, whether direct or indirect and whether or not the relationship is financial in nature. Various kinds of relationships that require disclosure include stock ownership, royalties, patents, and fees and honoraria for service on a speaker's bureau or advisory committee. As authors may benefit from a non-financial relationship, perhaps through prestige, academic advancement, or provision of services, these non-financial relationships warrant disclosure as well. In addition, relationships in which money was received by the author's institution, rather than directly by the author, as well as relationships by a first degree relative, can influence the author's work and should be disclosed. Relationships that can create an appearance or perception of conflict of interest also warrant disclosure. The International Committee for Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) suggests that authors provide any conflicts directly involving the submitted work that occurred at any time since the work's conception, and provide any potential additional disclosures outside of the submitted work if occurring within the preceding 36 month window. It is also common for journals to ask authors to categorize the relevance of provided disclosures to the submitted work. When no disclosures exist, this should be explicitly stated as well. Authors must carefully read the requirements and instructions of the particular journal regarding disclosures and adhere closely to the journal's policy. When uncertain if a possible relationship requires disclosure, it is advisable to err on the side of caution and provide the information. Once ensuring proper conflict disclosure by authors at the time of submission, journals then have the ability to publish this information, either in part or in full, in conjunction with each article so that readers are aware of potentially relevant conflicts when evaluating the study's findings. If it is discovered that authors failed to properly disclose potential conflicts of interest, then journals may impose various penalties, including retraction of a previously accepted manuscript.

In the present case, there was no direct relationship with the vendor of the CT-guided biopsy system under investigation. However, your relationship with a major CT vendor could potentially bias your evaluation of the biopsy system and create a perceived conflict of interest. Although the relationship is not ongoing, it ended recently in the past year. Furthermore, while you were not financially compensated for the relationship, you may have received other benefits from the CT manufacturer for your services. Therefore, based on the provided information, you

are advised to disclose this relationship, which the journal may then choose to publish with the article along with disclosures provided by other study authors. It is important that you provide such information upfront at the time of initial submission, so that the journal may take the disclosed relationship into account when considering potential acceptance of the manuscript.

References

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