

## **(4.2) Conflict of interest related to manuscript authors**

You are asked to perform a review for a biomedical journal that, by policy, employs an unblinded review process for all submitted manuscripts, in which the reviewers are provided with the manuscript's full author list and institution. The current manuscript for review deals with an area of investigation that only emerged within the past decade and in which there are currently a limited number of active investigators, including yourself. Thus, you are not surprised to recognize the list of authors. However you also note that one of the co-authors was on faculty at your institution the previous year, having only recently moved to the institution submitting the present article. You are concerned about a potential conflict of interest if accepting to perform the review. How shall you proceed?

### **Commentary**

The integrity of the peer review process requires that reviewers provide a fair and balanced evaluation of the work under consideration. An established relationship between the reviewer and the manuscript's authors threatens this aim. Thus, when reviewers are unblinded to the study's authors, they should recuse themselves from performing the review if such a relationship exists. Such action protects the reviewer, as well as the journal and manuscript authors, from later concerns of misconduct. It can be expected that researchers within a given discipline will be familiar with one another's work and may consider one another to be colleagues in a broad sense. Therefore, the exact extent of a relationship that creates a conflict of interest may not be clear-cut and can require an evaluation of the specifics of the particular case in order to make a decision. Factors to consider include how closely the individuals have worked together, as well as how recently the interaction took place. In general, it would be considered a conflict of interest to review work by authors who recently have been at one's own institution or by authors with whom one has recently collaborated on a project. For unclear situations, solicited reviewers must reflect honestly to assess whether they are able to perform an impartial review. When uncertain, it is advisable to maintain transparency and disclose the potential conflict to the journal. In general, it is suggested to err on the side of caution and decline a review if there is a reasonable probability that others may perceive a conflict of interest to exist.

In the present case, your mere acquaintance with the authors does not by itself create a conflict of interest. The journal has chosen to exercise an unblinded review process for submitted manuscripts. In some circumstances, for instance manuscripts submitted by a well-known research team or in an area having a relatively small pool of potential reviewers, it is anticipated that solicited reviewers will occasionally have some level of familiarity with the authors. Yet, in the present case, you have a deeper connection with the author through the author's recent position at your institution. This recent affiliation could bias your perception of the submitted work and create an apparent conflict of interest. Therefore, it is advised that you provide this information to the journal and, in the absence of other provided mitigating factors, decline performing the review.

## References

- 1) AMA Manual of Style Committee. AMA Manual of Style: A Guide for Authors and Editors (10<sup>th</sup> edition). Oxford University Press, March 2007.  
<http://www.amamanualofstyle.com/view/10.1093/jama/9780195176339.001.0001/med-9780195176339-chapter-5> Accessed: December 23, 2015.
- 2) International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Responsibilities in the Submission and Peer-Review Process.  
<http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/responsibilities-in-the-submission-and-peer-peview-process.html> Accessed: December 23, 2015.
- 3) Elsevier. Reviewer guidelines. <http://www.elsevier.com/reviewers/reviewer-guidelines> Accessed: December 23, 2015.
- 4) Cooper RJ, Gupta M, Wilkes MS. Conflict of Interest Disclosure Policies and Practices in Peer-reviewed Biomedical Journals. J Gen Intern Med 2006;21:1248-52.