

# Conflicts of interest

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**B**ecause of the increasing prevalence of commercial interests in dentistry, scientific journals must have clear policies for the publication of research and other information related to the development of new products. When a new bracket is designed or different alloys combined to produce a more perfect archwire, a number of very time-consuming steps are necessary before these products gain total acceptance by the clinician. Integral to the culmination of expensive laboratory studies and clinical trials is the publication of research results in a refereed dental journal.

Conflict of interest regarding a specific manuscript exists when the author, reviewer or the editor has ties to activities that could inappropriately influence or appear to influence his or her judgement. Trust in the review process and the credibility of published articles depends in part on how well conflict of interest is managed during writing, peer review, editing and editorial decision making processes. Participants in research, peer review and publications should disclose their conflicting interests, and at the appropriate time, this information should be made available to others. With policies on these matters in place and clearly communicated, some journals do not accept reviews and editorials from authors with a conflict of interest.

The New England Journal of Medicine was the first of the major biomedical journals to announce a policy for dealing with financial conflicts of interest among researchers submitting manu-

scripts for publication. Most conflict of interest policies, according to Thompson in the New England Journal, are directed toward financial interests. "These conflicts are both widespread and optional, as well as seductive. In fact, financial conflicts of interest are a matter of choice. Editors, authors and referees do not have to have them, nor do restrictions based on them constitute a violation of rights."<sup>1,2</sup>

Each one of these individuals has a critical, well-defined role to play in the publication process, yet none is all-powerful. It continues to amaze me that many of our readers think the editor is responsible for the accuracy of research published in the Angle Orthodontist. Not so! According to Addeane Caellegh, editor of Academic Medicine, "Publication does not make research findings right...it is a provisional judgement about the validity of the conclusions. Only the research community will establish over time whether the research was important or trivial." The editor does have a role in setting high standards for those involved in the review process as well as to help create an environment that protects the integrity of the scientific community.<sup>3</sup>

## Editors

When making decisions about the status of a particular manuscript, the editor should have no personal financial involvement in any of the issues being judged. Published articles and letters should include a description of all financial support and any conflict of interest that, in the editor's

judgement, readers should know about. The editor should not use for private gain the information gathered through working on a manuscript.<sup>4</sup>

### Authors

When authors submit an original manuscript, whether an article or letter-to-the-editor, they are responsible for recognizing and disclosing financial and other conflicts of interest that might bias their work. They should acknowledge in the manuscript all financial support for the work and other financial or personal connections to the work.<sup>4</sup>

### Reviewers

Reviewers are regularly exposed to conflicts of interest because they are, after all, chosen for their reputation in a particular field. On the whole, reviewers are a remarkable body of men and

women who perform this service selflessly, proving once again that science is indeed an altruistic profession. They should, however, disclose to editors any conflict of interest that could bias their opinions of a manuscript and they should disqualify themselves when appropriate. The editor must be made aware of reviewers' conflict of interest to interpret the reviewers' comments.<sup>5</sup>

The recognition of policies and guidelines in itself is not guaranteed to produce an error-free editorial system, but the editor has an obligation to the scientific community to make clear what the rules are and to apply them equitably. This operative concept of fairness and sound judgement is supported by this editor as well as the reviewers and advisors to the Angle Orthodontist.

### References

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3. Caellegh AS. Role of the journal editor in sustaining integrity in research. *Acad Med* 68, Supplement 3 1993; S23-S29.
4. International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Conflict of interest. *Ann Intern Med* 1993;118:646-7.
5. Maddox J. Conflicts of interest declared. *Nature* 1992; 360:205.