

doi: 10.3325/cmj.2009.50.339

Editorial Interest in Conflict of Interest

This year's first issue of the *Croatian Medical Journal (CMJ)* did not feature only the new design of the journal (1) but also an update of its Guidelines for Authors (2), made regularly for each volume. We can only hope that our authors did notice the changes, as editorial experience and research evidence show that readers do not read journal documents (3) and that journals do not keep up with the updates in publishing requirements (4).

One of the important changes to the Guidelines for Authors in 2009 was the more detailed explanation of possible editorial conflict of interest. Although the previous versions of the Guidelines always included the statement that the *CMJ* follows the principles of the best publishing practice recommended by a professional editorial organization, we wanted to specifically address the conflict of interest that may exist for editors, especially those from small scientific communities.

Conflict of interest is commonly discussed in view of an author or a group of authors of a published work. This is the reason why journal editors ask their authors to disclose their possible conflict of interest (5). Cases of undisclosed

Box 1.

Guidelines of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors on editorial conflict of interest (<http://www.icmje.org/#conflicts>)

II.D.3. Potential Conflicts of Interest Related to Commitments of Editors, Journal Staff, or Reviewers

Editors who make final decisions about manuscripts must have no personal, professional, or financial involvement in any of the issues they might judge. Other members of the editorial staff, if they participate in editorial decisions, must provide editors with a current description of their financial interests (as they might relate to editorial judgments) and recuse themselves from any decisions in which a conflict of interest exists. Editorial staff must not use information gained through working with manuscripts for private gain. Editors should publish regular disclosure statements about potential conflicts of interests related to the commitments of journal staff.

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financial ties between researchers and the industry has lead to calls not only for more transparent disclosure of possible conflict of interests in the journals, but even for public databases to disclose financial ties of research and industry (6).

What about editors of journals, members of their editorial boards, or their governing bodies? Should they declare their possible conflict of interest? Is there a way to manage it? Let's look at the succinct definition of conflict of interest by the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME): "Conflict of interest (COI) exists when there is a divergence between an individual's private interests (competing interests) and his or her responsibilities to scientific and publishing activities such that a reasonable observer might wonder if the individual's behavior or judgment was motivated by considerations of his or her competing interests. COI in a medical publishing affects everyone with a stake in research integrity including journals, research/academic institutions, funding agencies, the popular media, and the public." (7).

It is obvious that editors may have conflict of interest which may affect what they publish in their journal. This is particularly true for instances when they want to publish their own research, which is often true for editors of small scholarly journals who are usually volunteer editors and active researchers at the same time. However, the guidelines

Box 2.

Guideline on editorial conflict of interest from the World Association of Medical Editors

Publication Ethics Policies for Medical Journals (<http://www.wame.org/resources/publication-ethics-policies-for-medical-journals#conflicts>)

Conflict of Interest

Manuscripts authored by members of the editorial board present a special instance of potential conflict of interest. The review of these manuscripts must always be supervised by a senior editor (deputy editor or higher) who will review the decision of the assigned decision editor for objectivity before the decision is final.

on how to deal with this type of conflict are not always clear. The most widely accepted and respected publishing guidelines, that of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, address the management of editorial conflict. Box 3.

Guidelines on editorial conflict of interest, Council of Science Editors (CSE)

CSE's White Paper on Promoting Integrity in Scientific Journal Publications, 2009

Editors should avoid making decisions on manuscripts that conflict with their own interest, such as those submitted from their department or by research collaborators or competitors or those addressing an issue in which they stand to gain financially (eg, holding stock in a company whose product is discussed in the article). If they may have a perceived or possible conflict of interest, editors should delegate handling of any decision to other editors. Also, editors should only submit their own manuscripts to the journal if full masking of the process can be ensured (eg, anonymity of the peer reviewers, lack of access to records of their own manuscript). Editorials are an exception to this rule.

Box 4.

Advice on managing submission from editors in their own journals – Committee on Publication Ethics (<http://publicationethics.org/case/editor-author-own-journal>)

The issue here basically revolves around whether it is acceptable for editors to publish their own work in their journals; if it is, then the review process must be made as transparent and rigorous as possible. Certainly there are examples of editors publishing studies in their own journals, particularly in those circumstances where the choice of journals is limited, as in this case. Provided every effort is made to minimise any bias in the review process by having another associate editor handle the peer review procedure independently of the editor (recognising that it would be impossible to remove bias completely), and the process is absolutely transparent, then this would be the most appropriate route to take. It was suggested that the editor send the article out for review without any names on it, but he said the subject field was so narrow and specialised that any reviewer would know who had written the paper. As an extra precaution, if and when the article in question is published, the editor might like to publish an accompanying commentary showing how transparent the reviewing process had been.

conflict of interest in general terms (Box 1), advising that an editor has to excuse himself or herself from decision about manuscripts where they may have personal, professional, or financial involvement. WAME policy addresses the conflict of interest in the cases of submissions to the journal from the editorial board members (Box 2). The Council of Science Editors specifically advises editors (ie, journal editorial office) to ensure independent review of manuscripts submitted by editors and masking of this process to the editor in question (Box 3). Finally, the Committee on Publication Ethics, in their advice to a specific case they discuss, state that there may be occasions when editors could submit research articles to their own journals, but that they have to ensure a transparent process which minimizes possible biases in the review of the article and the editorial decision made in the end (Box 4).

To ensure the transparency and the distinctiveness of the review procedure and publication decisions on manuscripts submitted by editors, editorial board members, and representatives of the journal owners, the *CMJ* now clearly describe this process in the Guidelines for Authors (Box 5) and makes a separate statement on the conflict of interest

Box 5.

Conflict of interest declaration and managing for the Croatian Medical Journal (CMJ) editors

Policy for submissions by members of the editorial team

As all editors and Editorial Board members at the *CMJ* are active professionals and researchers, it may happen that they would want to submit their articles to the *CMJ*. This represents a potential conflict of interest, especially in cases of submissions from decision-making editors. In reviewing submissions from its editors and Editorial Board members, the *CMJ* follows the guidelines for good editorial practice set by international editorial organizations, such as World Association of Medical Editors (WAME; <http://www.wame.org/resources/publication-ethics-policies-for-medical-journals#conflicts>) and Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE; <http://publicationethics.org/case/editor-author-own-journal>). The review of such manuscripts will not be handled by the submitting editor(s); the review process will be supervised and decisions made by a senior editor who will act independently of other editors. In some cases, the review process will be handled by an outside independent expert to minimize possible bias in reviewing submissions from editors.

in question and its management at the end of the published article. Such processes have already been in practice in the journal, but they have not been made transparent to the public. For example, although the recommendation of WAME is that editorials are exempt from special review process, the *CMJ* sends most of its editorials out for peer-review, especially those that may be perceived as having conflict of interest on the side of editors.

With the current clarification in the Guidelines for Authors, we make sure that our readers and the public know the procedures in place to address editorial conflict of interest. Regardless of the journals legal and ownership structure, editors of scientific journals are primarily responsible for its content to the scientific community and the public. They have to make sure that the public can trust the published research; this is especially important for medical journals because the research they publish may have a significant effect on the health of individuals and populations. When editors and publishers fail because of own conflict of interest, the trust in scientific publication and science in general is seriously damaged – as in a recent scandal of fake medical journals published for a pharmaceutical company by the major publisher (8) and the case of an author-pays open-access journal that published (after a peer review) a computer-generated nonsense research paper (9). To ensure public trust in our editorial work, the *CMJ* will strive for transparency of the journal (10) and of the work of its editors (11).

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