

# Financial Disclosure: Why We Should Care

Authors' financial association with topics and products covered in published articles has received increased attention lately in both the lay and professional press. Initially perceived as primarily a problem for physicians, the availability of money from the private sector (e.g., pharmaceutical companies) for nurses to speak and write for publication has made the problem one that the nursing profession must address. Financial association with a company or a product can result in a perceived conflict of interest, which can be defined as a situation in which personal interests, relationships, or activities could prejudice one's ability to objectively perform professional duties. For those of us producing this journal, eliminating bias of those writing and reviewing papers is a specific and continuing concern.

We struggle with two types of conflict of interest. **Intellectual conflicts** exist "in the head" and are not tangible nor are they optional. Intellectual conflict of interest is inherent in the peer-review process because the success of peer review is predicated on the reviewers having expert knowledge of the topic in question. This almost guarantees a certain level of competitiveness in regard to a topic. The practice of double blinding the review process has arisen, in part, to reduce some of the potential bias when evaluating colleagues' work.

**Financial interests**, on the other hand, are tangible and optional and refer to affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with a direct financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in the manuscript. These may include

- Sources of funding for research or education endeavors from which research results
- Ownership interest (e.g., stock)
- Receipt of salary, honoraria, gifts, or travel expenses for manuscript preparation or for the oral presentation from which the manuscript was prepared
- Payment made by a company with an interest in the product or subject matter

to an editor or editorial company for assistance with manuscript preparation

- Financial interest in the product or subject matter by the author, the author's employer, or the author's immediate family members
- Employment by, consultancy to, offering paid expert testimony for, or participating as a board or advisory committee member for a corporate organization with a financial interest in the product or subject matter.

Many biomedical publications have a disclosure policy in regard to financial interest. Authors and peer reviewers are required to disclose financial associations with the topic of a paper or products mentioned therein. This information then is disclosed to relevant parties, including readers, when an article is published.

In general, disclosure should not and does not preclude publication provided that a manuscript has met the appropriate standards for acceptance. A general agreement exists that failure-to-disclose unfairly represents the paper and its conclusions as completely nonbiased and trustworthy. While that, in fact, might be the case, without disclosure, the reader is deprived of the opportunity to appreciate the research results or the information presented in the paper in its complete context.

In addition to manuscripts for journal publication, material subject to financial disclosure policy can include books and monographs, book chapters, manuals, guidelines, book and media reviews, letters to the editor, contributions to journal features containing clinical content, and articles for newsletters. For that reason, the Oncology Nursing Press, Inc. Board of Directors recently instituted a financial disclosure policy to cover all of these activities. Potential authors will find this policy addressed on the masthead of ONS publications. The policy is reflected in an expanded explanation in the author guidelines. It has been incorporated into the author agreement/copyright assignment form. Lastly, all Press Board members, editors, and mem-

bers of the editorial and review boards of all ONS publications will sign a form yearly that lists all financial interests with a potential for causing a conflict of interest.

For authors, disclosure of financial interest is required at the time the manuscript is submitted for peer review (if a journal article) or at the time of submission of the book or monograph proposal. This information is shared with peer reviewers at the time of the review. Editors will be able to assign peer reviewers who do not have a financial stake in the product being discussed or in a competitor's product. When necessary, financial associations on the part of the author will be shared with readers as part of the author's biographic information upon publication.

As we have seen in recent news reports, having a financial disclosure policy will not necessarily prevent failure to disclose in all cases. Nevertheless, it is important to be on the record mandating appropriate disclosure. Education of authors and readers alike is an important part of implementing these policies. In addition to editorials such as this, ONS's editors will be available at Congress and by phone and e-mail to answer questions, allay concerns, and discuss the value of instituting this policy. In the interest of ensuring continued integrity of each of our publications, we can do no less.

Please take a minute to review the masthead (p. 413) and the revised author guidelines (pp. 469-470) to see specifically how this policy is being implemented. Develop a habit of reading the author's biographical information on the first page of each article, and make note of any financial underwriting of or association with the work described in the article. Those of you who are peer reviewers or who are applying for a review board can expect to receive a form to sign very shortly. With a little effort, we will all soon be smarter and more discerning consumers of the professional literature published by ONS and the nursing publishing community in general. That will be a good development for our profession, and that is the best reason of all to care. 