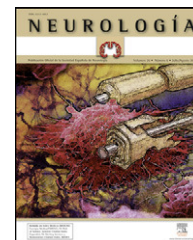




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## EDITORIAL

### Conflict of interests and scientific publications<sup>☆</sup>

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Received 10 October 2011; accepted 10 October 2011

Available online 9 February 2012

#### KEYWORDS

Authors;  
Conflict of interest;  
Editors;  
Journal;  
Misconduct

#### PALABRAS CLAVE

Autores;  
Conductas  
inapropiadas;  
Conflicto de  
intereses;  
Editores;  
Publicación

#### Abstract

**Introduction:** The potential relationships of interest between authors, reviewers, editors and financial management of the journals can lead to a conflict of interest in their performances.

**Development:** It analyses the potential conflicts of interest in the papers, with extreme examples, assessing the need for careful statement of the relations, especially economic.

**Conclusions:** Potential conflicts of interest should be transparent and the knowledge and values should be an objective of the magazines. The declaration of relationships should be required in the communication of research, but their existence should not prejudice misconduct.

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#### Conflicto de intereses y publicaciones científicas

#### Resumen

**Introducción:** Las potenciales relaciones de interés entre autores, revisores, editores y direcciones financieras de las revistas pueden llevar a conflictos de intereses en sus actuaciones.

**Desarrollo:** Se analiza los potenciales conflictos de intereses en las publicaciones, con ejemplos extremos, valorando la necesidad de declaración escrupulosa de las relaciones existentes, especialmente económicas.

**Conclusiones:** Los potenciales conflictos de intereses deberían ser transparentes y debe ser un objetivo de las revistas el conocerlos y valorarlos. La declaración de relaciones debe ser obligada en la comunicación de la investigación, pero su existencia no debe prejuzgar conductas inapropiadas.

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The publication of an article in a journal has both personal and institutional implications, for both countries

and companies.<sup>1</sup> This means that publications may have conflicts of interest at all levels.<sup>2</sup> In a recent editorial published in *Neurología*, the management team of the journal addressed the matter of editorial independence<sup>3</sup> and the goal of the present article is to analyse conflicts of interest. Although it seems obvious that a statement on conflict of interests should be mandatory at the time of transmission of research results, the number of publications requiring it was very low until recently.<sup>4,5</sup> At

<sup>☆</sup> Please cite this article as: Matías-Guiu J, García-Ramos R. Conflicto de intereses y publicaciones científicas. *Neurología*. 2011;27:1–3.

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present, the percentage of publications that require a declaration of conflict of interests has increased after large publishing groups such as Elsevier have joined the initiative. However, the publications themselves are exposed to discussion of potential conflicts of interest, especially on the issue of advertising,<sup>6–9</sup> because companies are interested in being published in journals.<sup>10</sup>

It is a fact that reviewers and especially editors decidedly influence what is published and, consequently, any commercial influence on them could pose a conflict of interest. Furthermore, the journals' financial management departments themselves may be subject to influences and enter the discussion on conflicts of interests. An example of conflict of interest in journals can be seen in connection with a study of two products from the same company that compared one whose patent was about to expire against another with the same indications but which was more recent. The article on the study that appeared in a publication with advertising concluded that the second drug was better than the first, while the same research in a journal that did not receive financial support concluded that there were no differences between them.<sup>11</sup> The opposite case has also existed: another article that had completed the editorial process was rejected under pressure from the marketing department because it concerned one of the advertisers of the journal.<sup>12</sup> These are allegations of publishing misconduct, but they are extreme and rare. Nevertheless, only 9 of 30 medical journals published apply the policy of requesting statements about possible conflicts of interest, both commercial and professional, from their reviewers. Moreover, only 8 of the 21 remaining publications are planning to do so because they consider that the editor is unaffected and that there is consequently no need for a declaration of conflict.<sup>13</sup> All this, despite the fact that the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors recommends that an editor who must make the final decision on an article should not have any relationship of interest with it.<sup>14</sup> However, the reality is that studies sponsored by industry are published in better journals with more impact<sup>15–18</sup> than those not funded by them.<sup>19,20</sup> Therefore, conflict of interests is not economic but competitive, because the publication of articles funded by industry increases the impact factor.<sup>21,22</sup> This fact, which has been proven in publications of great impact, does not imply that their editors have not made correct decisions regardless of interest, given that items with industry support were also rejected. Therefore, the existence of a relationship of interest should not presuppose that inadequate decisions are adopted.

Obviously, authors may also be subject to commercial influences,<sup>23</sup> as these may influence the outcome of their studies.<sup>24</sup> Thus, for the editor and reviewers to analyse a potential conflict, they should be adequately informed, which does not seem to be the case.<sup>25</sup> Regarding economic aspects, a recent study showed that only 70% of authors declared payments directly related to the article and only 50% did so when there was economic conflict of interest of an indirect nature.<sup>26</sup> A direct relationship is not usually declared and the question of ghost authorship has already been analysed in this journal.<sup>27,28</sup>

Potential conflicts of interest should be transparent and their awareness and evaluation should be an objective for journals. Their statement should be honest and constructive

and we editors should have the ability to analyse them without bias. The existence of a relationship of interest does not imply that this is reflected in an article, in the same way that advertising in a journal does not mean that the acceptability criteria vary. Similarly, professional competition should not mean that editors and reviewers do not evaluate items thoroughly. A declaration of relationships should be required in the communication of research, but its existence should not prejudice inappropriate conduct.

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