

## ARTICLE

# What Is Conflict of Interest?

by **Ira Salkin**

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An interesting brief article concerning sources of potential conflicts of interest (COI) appeared relatively recently in *Ethical Editing*, the newsletter of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)<sup>1</sup>. To set the stage, the editorial first presents the following succinct definition of COI, which appeared in 2009 in a report issued by the Institute of Medicine <sup>2</sup>:

{C}ircumstances that create a risk that professional judgments or actions regarding a primary interest will be unduly influenced by a secondary interest’.

The COPE article then outlined several secondary interests ranging from professional advancement of the authors to requests for favors from colleagues, friends, or even family

members that might unduly sway the actions of authors. Monetary rewards to authors for having their articles appear in high impact journals are one source of COI. For example, one of the editors of *The Lancet*, indicated in the newsletter article (in what must have been a personal communication as no source was provided) that a Chinese author received almost \$90,000 for having his paper published in her journal. The higher the impact factor of the journals the greater the monetary rewards provided to the Chinese authors. *The Lancet* editor went on to note that in many instances the funds received from publishing papers in ‘prestigious’ scholarly journals are greater than the authors’ yearly salaries.

In other situations, the authors may not receive direct financial

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<sup>1</sup> Committee on Publishing Ethics. (2010). Playing the publishing game: Conflicts of interest in academic publishing. *Ethical Editing* 2(4):5-6.

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Medicine. (2009). Conflict of Interest in Medical Research, Education, and Practice. Lo, B. and Field, M. J., editors. National Academy of Medicine: Washington DC, 440.

## *Conflict of Interest*

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support, but external funding sources may look more favorably on grant applications received from authors who have had their research appear in international scientific publications. An editor of a Brazilian journal noted (in again what must be considered a personal communication) that considering the support of the authors' laboratories and graduate students rests on the approval of their grants, there is tremendous pressure on scientists to have their work appear in 'favored' journals. This can contribute to another form of COI: responding to requests from colleagues for inclusion as authors despite their rather dubious associations with the studies described in the articles. Perhaps it is also one of the factors contributing to a steady increase in the number of individuals listed as authors on submissions I have received over the last few years. It stretches the limits of credulity that the 14 or more individuals included on some papers, which are fewer than 20 double-spaced manuscript pages, have met the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) requirements for authorship<sup>3</sup>. Specifically, the ICMJE code of ethics indicates authors must 1) have made substantial contributions to the conception and design, acquisition of and/or analysis and interpretation of data; 2) participated in the drafting of the paper or its revision relative to its intellectual content; AND 3) have read and approved the final manuscript prior to its submission to the journal. Note the use of 'and' infers individuals must meet all three standards to be listed as authors.

It has been my experience as the editor of a small STM (scientific, technical, & medical) journal that authors frequently do not fully describe the materials and methods employed

in their studies. This would obviously make it extremely difficult for others to repeat the authors' studies in order to verify the results and confirm the conclusions. In the majority of instances this oversight is attributable, in part, to the authors' familiarity with the undefined abbreviations, methods, and equipment and their assumption readers must be equally conversant with what the authors consider common techniques. Another innocent explanation might be the authors were forced to summarize these types of details so their papers meet the page limits of the journals. However, the absence of detailed methodological information could stem from COI on the part of authors to ensure their positions in the scientific community and advancement within their departments and institutions by delaying or preventing the publication of collaborative work. Unfortunately, this form of COI rests on anecdotal information that cannot be verified as suggested in the COPE article.

It's not only authors who may fall prey to COI, but reviewers too may attempt to ensure their positions or improve their chances of grant funding or extend a courtesy to colleagues by delaying or sabotaging the publications from competing laboratories. The peer-review system is predicated on the professionalism of those who volunteer to serve as external, objective arbitrators of the quality of manuscripts submitted for publication. However, it is probable, based again more on anecdotal information than hard figures, a percentage of reviewers negatively skew their evaluations so their rivals' papers are rejected. On the other hand, reviewers may provide positive assessments of works submitted by colleagues with whom

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<sup>3</sup> International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. (2009). Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals: Ethical Considerations in the Conduct and Reporting of Research: Authorship and Contributorship. Available at: [http://www.icmje.org/ethical\\_1author.html](http://www.icmje.org/ethical_1author.html).

# Conflict of Interest

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they have professional or personal relationships. To prevent such situations, the editors of an increasing number of journals have instituted double-blind review policies in which the identities of the reviewers are unknown to the authors and, possibly more importantly, the authors' identities are unknown to the reviewers. In addition, many editors have established requirements that proscribe reviewers, for a specified number of years, from having collaborated in research projects or being included in earlier papers of the authors whose work has been assigned to them. Another form of COI involving reviewers is their use of information contained in submissions to advance their own research. Despite the fact submissions are considered by almost all journals as privileged communications, an unknown but probably small percentage of reviewers, especially those in well funded and equipped laboratories, use the contents of papers they receive to quickly design new investigations or revise existing protocols in order to generate their own papers.

I would be derelict if I didn't include potential COI on the part of editors in this discussion. The role of the editor or editor-in-chief may vary from responsibility for the

general oversight of the review process to detailed management of all editorial office activities even to proposing the specific line-up of papers to be included in the next issue. However, one of the roles shared by the majority of editors is making the final decision as to the acceptance or rejection of submissions. We expect, as we do with authors and reviewers, editors will act in an objective and professional manner in making these potentially far sweeping decisions. In addition, the editors' final decisions usually are based on the recommendations of reviewers, associate editors, or members of the journal's editorial board. The ever increasing number of submissions being received by many journals causes the editors to be more reliant on such external counsel and to take less direct involvement in the evaluations of papers. This creates a COI between the editors' responsibilities to maintain the quality of papers published in their journals through their own direct input and the editorial office production demands to secure, in a timely manner, sufficient numbers of manuscripts for succeeding issues. The pressures exerted by authors to minimize the turnaround times between the submission of their manuscripts and first decision, as well as from acceptance

## **New! Interview with an Expert Series**

### **[Addressing Conflicts of Interest in Journals: Interview with Liz Wager](#)**

In the first installment of ISMTE's 'Interview with an Expert' series, Kathy Brister, managing editor of the *Journal of Applied Microbiology* and *Letters in Applied Microbiology*, speaks with publishing ethics expert Liz Wager, chair of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). Their lively discussion focuses on the key issues surrounding conflicts of interest (COI) in journal publishing. Listen to the podcast now and learn how COIs are defined, advice on developing and implementing a sound policy, what to do when COIs are undisclosed, and much more!

## ***Conflict of Interest***

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to final publication (online or print) create another source of potential COI for editors. To reduce the turnaround delays would require a delicate balance on the part of editors between the time required to be more directly involved in all aspects of the editorial operations and the needs of their own careers. I have half-jokingly suggested retired status should be one of the qualifications to serve as an editor-in-chief in order for the person to have sufficient time to appropriately manage an STM journal in these rapidly changing

times in the world of scholarly publication.

One can only speculate the seemingly increasing numbers of retractions of published papers by high impact, prestigious journals is due, at least in part, to COI pressures, including those described in this article. I believe such pressures ultimately influence the judgment of authors, reviewers, and editors.



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# ISMTE Local Group Update

by **Scott O'Brien**  
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The Research Triangle Park (RTP) group of ISMTE meets every other month to discuss various topics that fall under the purview of managing and technical editors. The group's name is adopted from the moniker ascribed to the concentrated cluster of industries engaged in research and development in and around Chapel Hill, Durham, and Raleigh, North Carolina. Attendance ranges from 6 to 12 individuals, numbers conducive to a lively yet structured exchange of ideas and perspectives. Topics discussed during recent meetings included cover art procurement, peer review systems, podcasting, production workflow, and transitioning to a new publisher.

The diverse professional duties among people in the RTP group mirror the multifocal nature of the responsibilities discharged by the broader ISMTE membership. Some individuals are specialists, with expertise in areas such as peer-review management, whereas others are generalists, with responsibilities cutting across several types of tasks, such as copyediting, website maintenance, and social networking. This is easily one of the strongest attributes of the RTP group because it increases the likelihood of receiving an informed response to questions that arise during the meeting.

The RTP group is also a terrific vehicle for networking. Editorial work is, for many, a solitary endeavor, and the group's bimonthly meetings are important forums for creating and maintaining relationships with peers. The RTP group has the added benefit of counting ISMTE board members Elizabeth Blalock (president) and Jennifer Deyton (secretary) among its members, as well as Jan McColm,

who has served as a contributing editor to *EON* and is currently on the resource committee. All three are valuable conduits for information about editorial trends, ISMTE activities, and professional contacts at the national and international levels.

The RTP meetings, and Jan in particular, have been top-shelf resources for me. I joined the *NCMJ* (*North Carolina Medical Journal*) as managing editor in July 2010. I considered my experience as a copyeditor of scholarly scientific and medical manuscripts at the University of Chicago Press to be the strongest basis for hiring me. However, the *NCMJ*'s production workflow and the level of skill exhibited by its small staff quickly betrayed the journal's history of hiring people with content knowledge (I earned an MPH in May 2010), rather than people with formal publishing experience. I attended the ISMTE meeting in August 2010 to bring context to my situation and to learn some of the best practices and other tools for improving the quality of my publication. Jan approached me during the meeting and shared information about the RTP group, and we met shortly thereafter, back in North Carolina, to discuss some of the short-term and long-term projects associated with my publication. I've attended two RTP meetings since then, both of which were fruitful, and I continue to call on Jan for assistance.

Meetings of the RTP group are informal and generally occur over lunch, in a centralized location; non-ISMTE members are welcome. Contact Jan ([gim@med.unc.edu](mailto:gim@med.unc.edu)) for details.



# Benefits of ISMTE Membership

by **Wendy Krank**

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Members of the International Society of Managing and Technical Editors (ISMTE) have new benefits to their membership this year. *Publishing Ethics 101: A Guide for the Editorial Office* was launched by the Training Committee in April. Kirsty Meddings, product manager at CrossRef, shared the ISMTE resource with her CrossCheck membership during the 30-day period when it was open to non-ISMTE members. If you haven't already, take a few minutes to review this excellent [resource](#).

Another recent launch from the Training Committee is the first installment of the [Interview with an Expert series](#). Members can enjoy a 12-minute interview with Liz Wager, the chair of COPE, in which she discusses conflict of interest policies. Additional podcast interviews are in development to provide more information and benefits to ISMTE members.

Meanwhile, the Resources Committee launched [Resource Central](#) this year: '... a collection of useful resources, tools, instructions and articles that will assist every editorial office in its peer-review management processes.' This page includes links to the ISMTE LinkedIn page, news from the world of publishing, useful resources, the ISMTE career center, a rejection rate calculator, and much more.

As the ISMTE resource tools and training opportunities grow and expand, so do the

benefits for ISMTE members. These tools are designed to help members improve their processes, and personally, I have noticed a change in my work process since I've had the opportunity to review these resources. It's definitely one of the greatest benefits of ISMTE membership. I am fortunate in many ways to have been with the Society since 2004. As a managing editor, my days are preoccupied with moving manuscripts through the peer-review process and

communicating with authors and editors. I personally don't have time to always stay mindful of changes in the publishing world. Now I have at my fingertips the ISMTE resources to quickly help me gain knowledge. These are keys

to my success in the publishing world.

As much as I value the resources and tools, networking within ISMTE is by far the greatest benefit. ISMTE has filled a social professional niche for me.

Whether it's the social networking, resources tools, or the new podcast feature, my member benefits have become a resource I can count on to improve my editorial office management. Without colleagues, resources, and training opportunities, my job as a managing editor would in fact be much more difficult. My opinion is the benefits outweigh the cost of ISMTE membership.

I am looking forward to the opportunity to attend the North American ISMTE conference August 9-10. See you there! 🌐

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along as a tweet.**

## *Variety Is the Spice of Life*

**by Jenny Hudson**

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My role as publishing assistant for BMJ Journals is hugely varied, helping to assist eight people: three journal managers; four publishers, including our US based publisher; and our journals publishing director. So, on a day-to-day basis I can be doing anything from updating the financial and editorial histories in each of our journal product plans to assisting with the compilation of the publisher reports for our editorial board meetings. I also keep up to date with the various journal metrics, such as the Impact Factor, and our ethical and editorial policies.

In addition to these wide ranging tasks, my main objective is essentially to assist and support the publishers with our launch and acquisition programme, Affinity. Under our Affinity brand we offer both a full publishing service for society journals as well as an on-demand publication service called Satellites. The Affinity programme was developed to grow our journals' portfolio and, since its launch in 2008, we have added seven journals and we don't intend to stop there. This service offers societies a chance to achieve both their commercial and non-commercial goals in publishing. It is important to BMJ Group that not only do we provide our society partners with the operational support to boost revenues and profit but also, by providing

expertise and strategic guidance, we deliver the support to help grow and develop their journals and maximize impact and readership.

Working with the publishers on the Affinity brand is another altogether varying role: creating and implementing a transition plan to ensure any new Affinity journals or BMJ brand extensions are integrated into the BMJ Group effectively; carrying out desk research for any potential tenders; and project managing the transition of a successfully won journal into our journals stable.

Satellites are bespoke sponsored publications and the content ranges across symposia output, review articles, guidelines, and case studies. BMJ Group provides a copyediting, production, distribution, and online hosting service; however, we do not commission or peer-review the content other than to ensure it is relevant to our readers and is unbiased. Recently, our Affinity programme has added to this service by hosting Satellite content in video format. Video satellites can either act as a visual and audible support to the topics explored within a written satellite or can be a stand-alone. Once a contract is agreed upon by both publisher and client, it is my job to work with the publishers, sales team, production, and the client to ensure the satellite is produced on time and to a high

quality.

My publishing career started almost three years ago here in the Journals department of the *BMJ* when I was appointed editorial assistant for three of our specialist journals: *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, *Journal of Medical Genetics*, and *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*. My role then was managing the work flow of manuscripts from submission to acceptance through the online submission system, Bench>Press; all the while keeping in constant communication with authors, reviewers and, of course, our editors. It was great to have this more hands-on experience as this enabled me to understand the complexities of the submission and acceptance process, get to know the different ‘personalities’ of the various journals as well as providing me with valuable skills. It is not just my role that has changed and developed but also the group as a whole. Evolution and change is a constant, starting with the consolidation of both the editorial assistant and production editor team to form the editorial production team, to the transition from Bench>Press to ScholarOne™ Manuscripts.

Within recent years, outside of the editorial office, there has also been the development of our corporate social responsibility programme. This has included the development of *The Green Team*, which aims to promote good

environmental practice; a link with *Camden Education Business Partnership (EBP) Programme*, linking our business to local schools to provide support by way of mentoring schemes and teaching children to read; and *BMJ4Life*, our charity initiative which currently supports two charities, *Cancer Research UK* and *PaLM*. As well as my daily role of publishing assistant I am heavily involved with both *BMJ4Life* and the *Camden EBP Programme*. *BMJ4Life* provides a social aspect as well as a chance to give back and to fundraise. The *EBP Programme* allows me to develop my leadership and advisory skills as I mentor a GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) student who wishes to become a doctor.

So, what do I enjoy about my role? Firstly, and you might consider most importantly since there’s so much of it, it is the variety I enjoy. This variety gives me a chance to develop a vast range of skills and abilities and it means I am constantly learning and developing. It gives me a chance to meet and work with new people across various departments and to learn from them. Furthermore, I enjoy working within the publisher team, I feel we are at the helm of the business with a view of what is coming at us as well as a clear idea of what we want to achieve.



**EON is seeking *column editors* for the *Tips & Tricks* and *Publication Partners* columns. The column editor is responsible for recruiting the column’s articles. Interested? Contact the Editor, Kristen Overstreet, at [kristen.overstreet@mac.com](mailto:kristen.overstreet@mac.com). We look forward to working with you!**

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## Calendar of Events

**ISMTE  
US Conference**  
**9-10 August 2011**  
Washington, DC-area  
[www.ismte.org](http://www.ismte.org)

**ISMTE  
European Conference**  
**18 October 2011**  
Oxford, UK  
[www.ismte.org](http://www.ismte.org)

**Effective Journal Editorial Management**  
**5 October 2011**  
London, UK  
<http://www.alpsp.org>

**Editorial Manager User Group Meeting**  
**28 November 2011**  
London, UK  
<http://www.editorialmanager.com/>

## *What would you like to tame?*

Do you have questions about specific programs, software, or hardware that you would like to see featured in one of these columns in 2011? If so, please contact Lindsey Brounstein, [LBrounstein@gastro.org](mailto:LBrounstein@gastro.org), the Taming Technology section editor and let her know what lions, tigers, and bears are running amok in your world.



## **New Training Module!**

### **[Publishing Ethics 101: A Guide for the Editorial Office](#)**

The ethical handling of the review process and publication of journal research is critical to guaranteeing the accuracy and transparency of information disseminated to the scholarly community. Editorial staff should be familiar with the fundamentals of ethical publishing, including the common types of ethical violations, the primary elements of an ethics policy, and how to correct errors in literature that result from a breach of conduct. "Publishing Ethics 101: A Guide for the Editorial Office" is a quick-reference tool that will provide editorial staff with these fundamentals, as well as resources for more in-depth information about the ethics of journal publishing. This module is a benefit of ISMTE membership.

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## ISMTE *EON*

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*A note on English: ISMTE aims to be a truly international society. English will represent our lingua franca, but we would like to stress that, in materials published in EON or online, variations in idiomatic usage and spelling should reflect the origins of the author. No one version of English is preferred over the other.*

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