Common Practices for Registering Reviewer Conflicts of Interest

Deborah Bowman, MFA, ELS, Senior Managing Editor of Clinical Publications; Stephanie Kinnan, Assistant Managing Editor of Clinical Publications, American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy

**Objectives**

1. Survey journal managers via the ISMTE Discussion Forum and Editorial Manager ListServe to ask whether and how they collect reviewer conflicts of interest (COIs).
2. Research sources like COPE, ICMJE, and Irene Hames’ book *Peer Review and Manuscript Management in Scientific Journals* to see what recommendations they have.
3. Compare responses and report findings of common practices.
4. Use this information to make recommendations to the leadership of the American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy.

**Purpose**

We wanted to determine whether we are doing unnecessary work in obtaining reviewer conflicts of interest. We surveyed Managing Editors to learn how they currently handle reviewer COIs. We also researched different sources like COPE, ICMJE, and books on peer review for recommendations. From these activities, we wanted to determine what most journals are doing and which practices would be the most time-effective while still keeping reviewer COIs transparent. It is our goal to be able to use this information to make recommendations to our Editor-in-Chief and Associate Editors.

**Results**

Our question resulted in six responses. Every one of them indicated that their reviewer invitations ask the reviewers to let them know of any COIs with that article before accepting the invitation.

Both COPE and ICMJE recommend the above-mentioned process and say to simply ask the reviewers (and editors) to excuse themselves on an article-by-article basis if a conflict exists. AMA agrees with this policy.

In *Peer Review and Manuscript Management*, Irene Hames says, “When first approached to review a manuscript (the reviewer) should declare any conflict of interest, either real or perceived, to allow the editor to decide whether this should disqualify them from review.” In her Golden Rules, she says, “All the parties in the peer-review process must declare any potential conflicts of interest and excuse themselves from involvement with any manuscript they feel they would not be able to handle or review objectively or fairly.”

**Conclusion**

We concluded that asking reviewers to fill out a COI form each year is not only unnecessary, time-consuming, and trying on our reviewers’ patience, but that asking on an article-by-article basis is more ethically sound and more likely to result in complete disclosure. Although our reviewer invitations do currently ask our reviewers to let us know of any COIs, we will make sure that information is more prominent within the reviewer invitation process. We will take these results to our Society leadership and recommend that we discontinue our current policy of asking reviewers to complete a form annually.

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**Background**

Since 2004, our Society’s leadership has had us ask our reviewers to complete a conflict of interest form annually. We take the information the reviewers submit and enter it manually into Editorial Manager’s People Notes for each person. That information then appears on the Reviewer Invitation page so the editor can ask the reviewer’s declared conflicts before he/she sends an invitation to review a manuscript. We have nearly 1,500 reviewers, so entering this information is an extremely time-consuming task each year. We wanted to investigate the recommendations of experts and find out how other journals are handling their reviewer conflicts of interest to see whether the work we are doing is necessary.

We posted this question on the ISMTE Discussion Forum and the Editorial Manager ListServe:

> I’m hoping to simplify our conflict of interest processes for our reviewers, and I would like to know how other people are handling them. Do you collect your reviewers’ COI? Do you collect them at regular intervals (and if so, how often?) or just once upon registration and ask them to send updates if anything changes? Do you enter them into the submission system where your editors can see them or do you just keep them on file and count on the reviewer to disclose if they have a conflict with a paper when they are invited to review?

We also looked through the COPE and ICMJE websites as well as Irene Hames book *Peer Review and Manuscript Management in Scientific Journals* and the AMA course "Essential Ethics for Medical Communicators."