

Book review

Competing interests in biomedical publications: main guidelines and selected articles, the latest volume of the Esteve Foundation Notebooks series, coordinated by A. Marusic and H. Markovitch. Esteve Foundation, 2013. Free to download, print copy on request. ISBN: 978-84-938163-1-8 (Paperback)



My congratulations to the Esteve Foundation and to the two coordinators of Notebook 24, Ana Marusic and Harvey Marcovitch. This compilation of six guidelines and fifteen major articles on the subject of competing interests in biomedical publication is a great idea. Competing interests are too often misunderstood both by journal editors and by authors of scientific

papers. Guidelines and articles clearly show that competing interests are primarily financial, and that other conflicts of other types are probably underestimated. Although non-financial competing interests exist they are less extensively studied than those involving profit. I have quoted an example of a non-financial competing interest from a PLOS Medicine paper (September 2008, volume 5) reproduced in this notebook: "Imagine you're an editor and you receive a paper from the scientist who supervised your postdoctoral fellowship. It's been a couple of years since you left this lab, but he has supported your career and you have warm feelings toward him; plus you still join your former lab mates occasionally at their monthly pub night. You select sympathetic reviewers and you fight hard for the paper at the editorial meeting".

This compilation shows the interest of scientific societies and editors in this theme, but does not tell us what authors and reviewers - major players in the publication system - think. We have few data on these topics: Do authors understand what they have to declare? Do authors under-disclose? Do reviewers declare their competing interests to editors? What are the implications and influences of disclosures on the publication system? There are studies showing that declaring interests could reduce the credibility of a manuscript! We lack evidence to confirm or invalidate our opinions; more research is needed - at present authors do not seem to know what to disclose, and editors, apart from those of a small number of prestigious international journals, rarely declare their competing interests.

The information contained in this notebook is comprehensive: the guidelines are consistent between the American and European scientific societies, and the ICMJE statement pattern is a good example. It seems that English language publications are more concerned about non-disclosure, but this is mostly due to the lack of dissemination of guidelines to non-English-speaking cultures; few translations have been done, and they seem unimportant for

authors, editors and reviewers. The 2003 chapter "Conflict of interest" that I wrote for the EASE Science Editors' Handbook will be radically updated for the forthcoming 2013 edition. Unfortunately, I am not convinced that transparency, reporting competing interests, and disclosures improve the situation and prevent misconduct: loyalty is key!

On the Esteve website, the presentation is good: "The publication is intended as a useful tool for readers, authors and editors of scientific journals, and for those who are interested in preserving the integrity of scientific knowledge. A collection of a wide range of resources for combating bad practices in biomedical publication, the book addresses conflict of interest as a factor that may have a significant adverse effect on the field of research. And although findings of malpractice are less serious than the falsification or fabrication of data, cumulatively their damage on [sic] scientific knowledge can be greater than that of the most notorious cases."

Notebook 24 can be downloaded (chapter by chapter, except three chapters for copyright reasons, although two of these can be downloaded from other sources) from the Esteve Foundation website: http://www.esteve.org/aw/Home/Secciones_Web/Publicaciones/Cuadernos/~flc/competing/. Alternatively, the Foundation will mail a free copy to you within a few days on request.

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