EDITORIAL

Current Opinion in Hematology’s ‘harmony of interests’ policy

Thomas P. Stossel

Harvard Medical School and Translational Medicine Hematology Divisions, Brigham & Women’s Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

Correspondence to Thomas P. Stossel, MD, American Cancer Society Professor of Medicine, Harvard Medical School, Director, Translational Medicine Division, Senior Physician, Hematology Division, Brigham & Women’s Hospital, 1 Blackfan Circle, Karp 6, Boston, MA 02115 USA
Tel: +1 617 355 9001; Fax: +1 617 355 9016; e-mail: Tstossel@rics.bwh.harvard.edu

Current Opinion in Hematology 2007, 14:1–2
© 2007 Lippincott Williams & Wilkins
1065-6251

I have edited Current Opinion in Hematology for the past decade and am increasingly pleased with its high quality. This excellence is entirely due to the efforts of the Section Editors in their selection of outstanding topics and of distinguished authors to write about them. The willingness of the editors and authors to sacrifice the time and effort to produce such wonderful articles is a tribute to the journal’s value, reflected in its high impact factor.

What also makes Current Opinion in Hematology unique is its residence among a vanishing minority of journals that does not have an oppressive ‘financial conflict of interest’ policy. To be precise, the Current Opinion series, under direction of its publisher, has succumbed to prevalent pressure and does post a stated requirement that authors disclose their sponsors and spell out their conflicts of interests, whatever these may be. In contrast to recent activities of many editors, however, who devote immense energy to policing and enforcing such stipulations, I leave it to authors’ discretion to comply as they see fit. Indeed, as far as I am concerned, Current Opinion in Hematology’s only serious ‘policy’ is to make the best possible new hematology scholarship available in concise form to readers.

Hematology is a clinically effective branch of medicine because it has many useful products that have emerged from interactions between academics and private industry: only industry delivers the products to the public. The contribution of the commercial sector to the progress of hematology (and of medicine in general) exemplifies what the great Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises called the ‘harmony of interests’ [1]. When anti-business critics emphasize conflicts of interest, they see medical practice and medical research as zero-sum games in which a commercial conspiracy wastefully monopolizes resources, rather than as an evidence-based evolutionary process that continuously increases net value.

Activist-inspired conflict of interest concerns have inspired the accretion of rules associated with scientific publication. When I began my academic medical career in the late 1960s, the only such rule, often unstated, was that papers could be sent to only one journal for review at a time. Shortly thereafter appeared the ‘Inglefinger rule’, a prohibition from publicly disclosing the contents of papers accepted for publication prior to an embargo date. It has been argued that this rule has no purpose other than to enhance the cache value of journals [2]. Because some highly publicized cases of scientific fraud in the 1980s involved so-called ‘honorary authors’, individuals in positions of authority who had not overseen fraudulent work, journals began to insist on signed attestations by authors accepting responsibility for the entire contents of submitted papers. At the time I was Editor in Chief of the Journal of Clinical Investigation and participated in meetings of journal editors where this topic was discussed. I tried to argue that in an increasingly interdisciplinary and complex world of research, one simply has to trust one’s collaborators; when I provide protein to my X-ray crystallographer colleague, he has to believe that my protein is what I say it is, and I cannot competently judge the crystallography work. I also believe that credit allocation can often involve nuances not readily reducible to rigid formulas. I argued in vain for such flexibility, as the regulatory demands escalated, and now many journals require written manifests describing exactly what every participant in a project supposedly contributed. I suspect that this documentation has produced no less honorary or otherwise questionable authorship than before, but that it has contributed to a lot of lying.

Currently financial disclosures dominate the confessional demands of journals. Whereas we previously named our research sponsors to honor them, now we must disclose them so the reader can discount our work and our word, based on the presumption that financial motives corrupt us. The code word for this devaluation is ‘conflict of interest’. According to the dictionary, a conflict is a conflict, but activists have morphed the definition to mean any relationship of an author with a corporate concern for which the author gets paid. For a time, authors had discretion to disclose what they believed were relevant corporate connections, but now editors of some high-profile journals want to arrogate that decision to themselves. Astonishingly, they presume to humiliate authors publicly who fail to disclose what the editors even admit are irrelevant ‘conflicts’.
Since I have publicly challenged what I believe are excesses of a conflict of interest inquisition [3,4], I need to be up-front about my nonpolicy concerning Current Opinion in Hematology. I see far more reason to worry that an author inappropriately hypes his or her own achievements in hopes of a promotion or a research grant (for which the promoted party might receive a pay rise) or his or her pet clinical procedure (which may result in more remuneration) than to fear that an author will oversell a product of a company in (unlikely) hopes of appreciated stock value. Many of our distinguished authors are in demand by multiple companies, so they have no need to pander to any particular one.

I believe that the willingness of the Section Editors to take responsibility for detecting and toning down what they perceive as overly enthusiastic promotion of products by an author and to demand balance, the inherently moral nature of most of our colleagues in the medical marketplace, the organized skepticism of science [5], and the freedom of dissenters to speak out are our best defenses against wrongdoing. If readers of Current Opinion in Hematology believe that an author has unfairly promoted or criticized a product, we will honor the challenge with an open mind. The challenge, however, must emphasize facts, not emotions, tastes or personal grievances.

References

5 Merton R. Science and technology in a democratic order. J Legal Political Sociol 1942; 1:115–128.