

### **(4.3) Conflict of interest related to manuscript content**

You have been asked by a journal to review a manuscript investigating the clinical performance of a new MRI contrast agent. You have authored a number of prior publications regarding this agent, and you feel that you are well positioned to review this article given your experience in the area. Your own work so far has largely been favorable regarding a positive benefit from the agent's use.

You agree to perform the review, curious to see what this other group has found regarding the new agent. To your surprise, you see that this article reports a negative outcome, specifically that the new contrast agent fails to outperform the current mostly widely used agent and that its usage does not seem to be warranted based on the observed data. You are concerned that publication of this negative outcome may impact readers' perceptions of your own earlier work that had a different result, and you wonder about the reliability of the authors' findings. Given your concerns, you decide to advise that the manuscript be rejected. What ethical issue is raised by this description?

#### **Commentary**

Authors of manuscripts being submitted for peer review have a right and expectation that field experts will evaluate their work in an unbiased fashion. Thus, it is incumbent upon potential reviewers to recuse themselves from performing the review if having any conflict of interest, whether real or apparent, that may limit their ability to perform a fair and unbiased evaluation of the submitted work. Simply having performed research in an overlapping area does not by itself constitute a conflict. Indeed, journals often seek specific reviewers because of their recognized expertise in the area of the submitted article and may still deem a given individual to be an appropriate reviewer, aware of the individual's potentially overlapping work in the area, if it is believed that an objective review can be provided. Thus, at issue is whether the potential reviewer is able to judge the manuscript on its own merits, using his or her expertise in the area to craft an informed and impartial assessment of the quality of the work.

In performing a review, bias may arise if the findings of the submitted manuscript differ from those of earlier publications by the solicited reviewer. In such instances, the reviewer must make an honest decision regarding his or her own ability to perform a fair assessment, independent of preconceived notions of the likely findings in the study. To reject the manuscript based on the reviewer's preconceived notions of the topic would deprive the authors of the opportunity for an honest review of their work. An additional bias may arise if the submitted work overlaps with work by the reviewer that has not yet been submitted for publication. In this situation, the AMA Manual of Style suggests that the potential reviewer may consider declining the review to avoid subsequent concerns of plagiarism. Such an approach may also help avoid subsequent concerns of rejecting the reviewed article in order to preserve the novelty of the reviewer's own work at the time when it is submitted. These determinations largely need to be made on a case-by-case basis, with the reviewer called upon to respect the integrity of the peer review process and assess their ability to objectively evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the study, independent of their own prior work in the area. Thus, in summary, solicited reviewers should disclose all relevant concerns regarding potential conflicts of interest to the journal and decline performing the review if either the reviewer or editor has doubts regarding the ability to perform an objective review.

## References

- 1) AMA Manual of Style Committee. AMA Manual of Style: A Guide for Authors and Editors (10<sup>th</sup> edition). Oxford University Press, March 2007.  
<http://www.amamanualofstyle.com/view/10.1093/jama/9780195176339.001.0001/med-9780195176339-chapter-5> Accessed: December 23, 2015.
- 2) International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Responsibilities in the Submission and Peer-Review Process.  
<http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/responsibilities-in-the-submission-and-peer-peview-process.html> Accessed: December 23, 2015.
- 3) Cooper RJ, Gupta M, Wilkes MS, Hoffman JR. Conflict of Interest Disclosure Policies and Practices in Peer-reviewed Biomedical Journals. J Gen Intern Med 2006;21(12):1248-52.