Disclosure of interest or conflict of interest?

Submission of an article in an international journal now requires systematic completion of a "disclosure of potential conflicts of interest" form. The same holds true for national and international podium presentations, also subject to a statement disclosing any financial relations the speaker and co-authors may have with industry. This question, by no means a minor one, regularly comes to the forefront of the media scene, chiefly in affairs relative to a particular medication or implantable medical device. This is an ethical requirement that engages the responsibility of the author, the co-authors, and the institution where the study was conducted, as well as the journal’s editorial board. It is because the Journal has an important responsibility in this area that we have decided to request all the OTSR editors to declare any financial relations they may have with industry. Our readers will have access to this information through the OTSR-RCOT secretarial offices.

Why make the disclosure statement? How should the disclosure be made? What should be disclosed?

The "disclosure of potential conflicts of interest" is too often perceived as an intrusion on an author’s professional, even personal, life. However, it is anything but that. The term "conflict of interest", now in general use, also contributes to this perception. This is not a "conflict" but "a disclosure" intended to provide transparency. Collaboration between an implant manufacturer and surgeons is indispensable and healthy. Manufacturers could not develop their products without surgeons and surgeons could not implement their projects without the assistance of industry. And all work deserves its just reward.

Nonetheless, these relationships should be clear and transparent: such is increasingly the case in the formalization of contracts between manufacturers and surgeons. Relationships should also be disclosed in publications reporting the resulting studies. It goes without saying that the reader’s view on a study of results after total hip arthroplasty will differ depending on whether or not the author is a promoter of the implant. This information is at least as important as the patients’ BMI and age, the type of osteoarthritis, the study design, or any other information presented in the Material and Methods section, in the assessment of scientific bias.

This disclosure form should therefore be completed with the greatest attention and precision.

When should a disclosure be made?

Two options are possible: restrictive or open.

The restrictive option consists in only disclosing the interests directly and exclusively related to the implants or medications cited in the article. An author X conducts a study on a prosthesis Y and has a relationship with the same manufacturer for a prosthesis Z. In this restrictive option, he declares no conflict of interest. This is an option spontaneously followed by many authors. However, it provides little information and obviously does not guarantee the independence of the study.

This is why OTSR-RCOT wishes to follow the guidelines of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE, www.icmje.org/ethical_4conflicts.html), which opens the field of disclosure.

Any financial, personal, or institutional relationship in the 36 months preceding the submission, related to "the subject" of the article and not only "the implants or the medications" cited in the article should be declared. The following are two illustrative examples:

- a study on the treatment of stiffness after total shoulder arthroplasty (whatever model or models are used) requires a disclosure if the author has interests with a shoulder prosthesis model, even if it is not cited in the article;
- a study on the poor results of a total knee prosthesis X requires a disclosure if the author has interests with another prosthesis model, whether or not it is manufactured by the same manufacturer, and even more so if it is produced by another manufacturer.

A multiplicity of examples could be cited.

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What should be disclosed?

Financial relationships come in many forms (they can be found in the author recommendations of the journal or in the glossary established by the ICMJE www.icmje.org/coi_glossary.pdf): stock holdings in a company, royalties, fees, salary, a budget specific to the study, but also an invitation as a speaker or auditor, payment of travel expenses, etc. These can apply to the author, one or all of the coauthors, and finally to the institution. OTSR-RCOT would like all of these relationships to be disclosed.

We thank you in advance for taking into consideration these concepts, which, as the reader will have understood, have no further objective than to ensure the greatest possible transparency between the journal’s authors and readers.

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