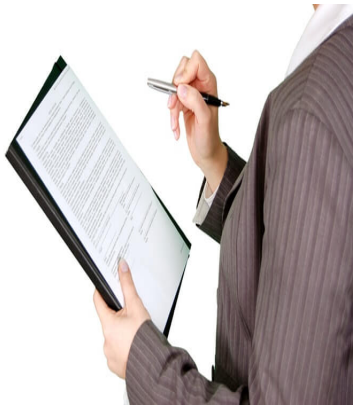

## Description

You can also listen to this article as an audio recording.

https://www.enago.com/academy/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/amazon_polly_246.mp3

“Do you have a conflict of interest?” is a question most researchers are used to answering. In science, all good journals ask authors to declare any conflict of interest.

Basically, a conflict of interest is any situation where a person holds competing interests, or loyalties. For example, a researcher may receive funding from a drug company. When studying a product made by that company, the researcher has a conflict of interest. They may be biased in the way they conduct the study or handle the results – even if they are not aware of it.

In academia, researchers can have different types of conflict of interest. For example, they might be asked to review the work of a colleague. They could be asked to provide a peer review of a colleague’s paper, or sit on a grant review panel for funding for their institution. In these cases, the researcher should declare their conflict. They would normally be excused from the task. However, these rules don’t seem to be applicable on the editors. Let us find out why this is a malpractice.

# Why is Disclosing a Conflict So Important?

Editors, particularly of medical journals, insist that authors disclose any conflict of interest. Failing to do so could destroy the reputation of the author and the journal. In the worst cases, failing to disclose a conflict can even end up harming public health.

In one of the most famous examples, the disgraced doctor Andrew Wakefield was found guilty of failing to disclose a conflict of interest. It was this – rather than the unsound and unethical research conducted by Wakefield – that first drew attention to the case.



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In short, Wakefield was one of the authors of a paper that suggested a link between the MMR vaccine and autism. This was published in the British medical journal *The Lancet*. At the time, the lawyerssuing over alleged vaccine injury paid Wakefield as an expert. Shockingly, the parents of some of thechildren in his study were the ones suing. This is a clear and obvious conflict of interest. However,while *The Lancet* eventually retracted the paper in full, the ill-effects of Wakefield's lies live on.

Clearly, this is an extreme example. While a conflict of interest does not always mean a study should not be trusted, it is vital that it is disclosed. This allows anyone reviewing the work to take all factors into account.

However, while it is the norm for authors to declare any conflicts of interest, the same cannot be said for journal editors. Why is this the case? After all, editors are just as likely to have ties to industry, for example.

## Editors Have Conflicts Too

A recent study found that just 12% of top medical journals require editors to disclose ties to industry. On the other hand, previous studies have shown that about half of all editors in the US have taken payments from industry.  It seems that medical journal editors demand a level of honesty from authors that they do not ask of themselves.

The study, published in *BMJ Open*, looked at 130 different medical journals. This included high-profile journals like *JAMA*, *The Lancet* and *Nature Reviews*. The authors split the journals into 26 groups, based on topic. In half of the groups, no journals listed editors' conflicts of interest.

Some journals are actually failing to meet their own standards by not declaring editors' conflicts of interest. Of the journals in the study, 73% belong to the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). COPE says that, "editorial conflicts of interest should be declared, ideally publicly." Also, many of the journals have agreed to be open and honest through the whole publication process. This will increase the trust and credibility in the publishing industry.

In the US, makers of medical products must disclose any payments to doctors. This has been the case since 2013. A 2018 study found that around half of the editors of 60 US medical journals had received payments from industry. These payments were for things like travel and consulting work

## Why Don't All Editors Disclose Conflicts?

A large majority of medical journals do not publicly disclose editors' conflicts of interest. But why not? The reasons seem to vary.

Some journals say that, although they do not publicly disclose conflicts, they do so internally. Editors may also be asked to recuse themselves from a particular task if they do have a conflict.

*The Lancet* says that it does follow COPE's policy, even though it does not publicly disclose conflicts. Other journals have rules banning editors from financial ties to, for example, any biomedical companies. Editors are asked to agree to these rules every year.



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The reasons why all journals do not simply declare editors' conflicts publicly is unclear. It may simply be because this is not the norm. It may be because people tend to pay more attention to the author of a paper than the editor of a journal. Whatever be the reason, failure to disclose conflicts could have serious results.

## What is the Effect of Failing to Disclose an Editor's Conflict?

We have seen that an author who fails to disclose a conflict of interest could end up guilty of scientific misconduct. The same is surely true of journal editors.

Journal editors have a lot of responsibility. They control which papers appear in a journal. For example, an editor could receive a paper that is related to a product made by a company he receives payments from. The author may have no conflict, but the editor does. He could, for example, reject the paper straight away. Or he could assign peer reviews he hopes will treat the paper in the way he would like.

Failure to disclose an editor's conflict of interest could destroy faith in the author, editor and journal. In the end, this could even affect the public's confidence in the scientific process.

What do you think? Should journal editors also publicly disclose a conflict of interest? Or is this unnecessary? Please share your thoughts in the comments below.

**Category**

1. Publishing Research
2. Understanding Ethics

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