Conflict of Interest Disclosure Policies and Practices in Peer-reviewed Biomedical Journals

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OBJECTIVE: We undertook this investigation to characterize conflict of interest (COI) policies of biomedical journals with respect to authors, peer-reviewers, and editors, and to ascertain what information about COI disclosures is publicly available.

METHODS: We performed a cross-sectional survey of a convenience sample of 135 editors of peer-reviewed biomedical journals that publish original research. We chose an international selection of general and specialty medical journals that publish in English. Selection was based on journal impact factor, and the recommendations of experts in the field. We developed and pilot tested a 3-part web-based survey. The survey included questions about the presence of specific policies for authors, peer-reviewers, and editors, specific restrictions on authors, peer-reviewers, and editors based on COI, and the public availability of these disclosures. Editors were contacted a minimum of 3 times.

RESULTS: The response rate for the survey was 91 (67%) of 135, and 85 (95%) of 91 journals reported having an author COI policy. Ten (11%) journals reported that they restrict author submissions based on COI (e.g., drug company authors' papers on their products are not accepted). While 77% report collecting COI information on all author submissions, only 57% publish all author disclosures. A minority of journals report having a specific policy on peer-reviewer 46% (42/91) or editor COI 40% (36/91); among these, 25% and 31% of journals state that they require recusal of peer-reviewers and editors if they report a COI. Only 3% of respondents publish COI disclosures of peer-reviewers, and 12% publish editor COI disclosures, while 11% and 24%, respectively, reported that this information is available upon request.

CONCLUSION: Many more journals have a policy regarding COI for authors than they do for peer-reviewers or editors. Even author COI policies are variable, depending on the type of manuscript submitted. The COI information that is collected by journals is often not published; the extent to which such "secret disclosure" may impact the integrity of the journal or the published work is not known.

KEY WORDS: conflict of interest; disclosure; peer-review; editorial policy.

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Each year, thousands of articles are published in peer-reviewed biomedical journals. Journal publication of authors' disclosure of conflicts of interest (COI) has become quite common. With increased media attention and public scrutiny of reported conflicts, and concerns about the impact of industry-sponsorship, journals have stressed the importance of such author disclosures, and in many cases have attempted to make them mandatory.1,2

Previous studies have focused primarily on the impact that study funding and author COI have on the reporting and conclusions of journal articles. 3-11 Conflicts of interest among journal peer-reviewers and editors may be equally important; however, as these groups control decisions about article publication and publication content, and thus have enormous impact on the biomedical literature. It becomes important to understand the extent to which peer-reviewer and editor COI is documented and handled, to begin to understand how these COIs may affect the peer-review processes.

The World Association of Medical Editors (WAME), the International Council of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), and Committee on Publication Ethics (CPEN) all have guidelines that recommend policies for authors, staff, peer-reviewers, and editors.12-14 However, little is known about the policies and practices of journals regarding COI among peer-reviewers and editors, and their disclosure to the public. While 1 prior study has examined editor COI policies, it was limited to a small sample of journals, in 1 specialty only.15 We undertook our investigation in an attempt to characterize the policies of a broad variety of general and specialty medical journals with regard to COIs of not only manuscript authors but also peer-reviewers and editors. While we expected journals to have formal policies on COI for authors, we hypothesized that similar polices for peer-reviewers and editors would be less common, and that public disclosure of such information would be limited.

METHODS

Study Design

We performed a cross-sectional survey of peer-reviewed, biomedical journals to characterize journal COI policies.

Selection of Participants

We selected a convenience sample of peer-reviewed journals, chosen to reflect a broad range of general and specialty medical topics, with an emphasis on primary care specialties. We included only journals that publish clinical research, while excluding those that publish only review articles. At the same time, we avoided journals that exclusively, or primarily, publish basic science research. We included only English-lan-
guage publications. We attempted to choose journals that are most prominent in their specialty area, first selecting journals in 29 content areas as rated by their impact factor, and then cropping the field based on the opinions of practitioners in the relevant content areas. (We excluded journals in which the editor was a pilot tester of our instrument.) While the majority of journals we chose are published in the United States, we also attempted to include internationally published journals for each specialty (Table 1). Our goal was to create a diverse sample that captured the most influential and prominent journals in the various general and specialty areas.

Survey Development

We developed a 19-question, 3-part survey to obtain information about journal COI policies for authors, peer-reviewers, and editors. The only identifying information collected was the name of the journal, used only to determine whether a particular journal editor had responded. For each portion of the survey (authors, peer-reviewers, and editors), we asked general information about any journal COI policy, and whether specific policies required the participant (author, peer-reviewer, or editor) to provide a written attestation of their COI statements. We asked about any attempts made by the journal to verify COI statements, and any specific restrictions on peer-review or authorship based on COI. For example, we asked whether review articles regarding specific products could be written by authors with financial COI with regard to the same product. We additionally asked about the availability or publication of disclosure statements. For each portion of the survey, we asked additional specific questions pertinent to each type of contributor. For authors, we asked about differential journal policies on collecting and publishing information based on the type of submission (e.g., original research, review, letters), and any restrictions on authorship based on disclosed COI. For peer-reviewers and editors, we asked how often COI information is collected, and whether the journal has any policy regarding recusal from any defined activities in the presence of a possible or perceived COI. (Survey instrument available online—Appendix A.)

Survey Administration

We developed a web-based version of the survey for data collection, which was pilot tested by a small group of journal editors, after which final revisions to the content were made, for clarity and convenience.

We used the website of each journal chosen to identify the journal editor, and contact information. We then contacted each journal editor, or members of the editorial staff office, by email, asking editors either to answer the survey themselves, or to appoint a responsible staff representative (e.g., managing editor) who would have accurate knowledge of journal policies. Nonresponders were recontacted every 3 to 4 weeks, up to 3 times. We provided the URL for the web-based survey in our letter request to allow editors to link directly to the survey web page, or allowed editors to print the web survey and fax responses. For the minority of editors who could not access the website or preferred not to enter data on the website, we faxed a print version of the survey and manually entered their responses.

Analysis and Outcomes of Interest

Our planned analysis was descriptive. We present estimates for the frequency of disclosure policies, the manner of editorial and peer-review conflict management, and the public acknowledgment (published) of these disclosures with simple descriptive percentages.

RESULTS

We contacted 135 journals, including 29 categories of general medical journals, primary care journals, and various medical and surgical specialties or subspecialties and received a response from 91 journals (response rate 67%). Most (92%) directly entered responses on the website, while the remaining 8% faxed responses on a printed version of the survey; in these cases, data were manually entered on the website by a research assistant. The majority of responders reported a journal policy pertaining to author COI disclosure (93.4%), although not all journals with such a policy require a written attestation (Table 2). Policies to verify authors’ disclosures were infrequently reported (8.8%), although the majority of journal editors (61.5%) reported instances or particular