

## Opening Pandora's box: Public declaration of competing interests

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Conducting transparent research is critical for the credibility of research findings and maintaining public trust in the research process. Considering how financial, institutional and personal interests influence how our research is designed, conducted and published is an increasingly important part of this process of transparency. Unfortunately, these competing interests are often not recognized (1) or declared (2-3) and have the potential to undermine public confidence in medical science.

*Open Medicine* is delighted to publish a Conflict of Interest checklist by Rochon and colleagues (1) that draws researchers to consider and record potential competing interests during the research process from study inception through to publication. For the first time, the checklist provides a single cohesive document for those stakeholders that may have a role in the adjudication or evaluation of the research project - research ethics boards, funding bodies, journal editors and readers- to review, interpret and manage research competing interests. Critically, it also provides a record that can be held in the public domain for scrutiny and individual evaluation over time.

We believe that the checklist has two key strengths: the process undertaken to develop the checklist and its broad scope. The checklist was developed using a three phase process: the research team drafted initial checklist items based on published literature related to competing interests, 43 reviewers rated the items and provided feedback (19 experts, 12 team members and 4 research staff) and the revised checklist was discussed by 28 meeting participants at a day long face-to-face meeting. Thereafter, the consolidated checklist was piloted for usability and an example document, explanation document and fillable pdf document were developed and reviewed at a second face-to-face meeting. The research team's receptivity to broad user input demonstrates a commendable commitment to genuine knowledge translation in the form of a practical product. (4)

The scope of the checklist is also critical. It contains four sections; administrative, study, personal financial and authorship information covering processes from study inception to completion. The time frame and breadth of information collected adds value beyond the recently released International Committee of Medical Journal Editor (ICMJE) Uniform Disclosure Form for Potential Conflicting Interests (3), which is designed for authors to submit to journal editors at publication, representing a final summary of relevant financial competing interests for the prior 36 months. The ICMJE statement is also more prescriptive in identifying what constitutes a financial competing interest. Additionally, the ICMJE statement is completed at the time of publication, thus that there is no scope to manage identified competing interests as they arise. Rather, they simply exist.

The nature of Rochon et al checklist – that it is filled out throughout the lifetime of a study – ensures that researchers consider, from the outset, whether and how potential competing interests might influence study design, the choice of collaborators etc. This provides an opportunity for all stakeholders to identify potential biases and manage competing interests proactively, rather than discovering at publication stage that there are irreconcilable conflicts. In this sense it also serves as an educational tool for

investigators in the conduct of research and brings their attention to the kinds of information that should be disclosed in order to interpret a competing interest.

Being able to use a single comprehensive checklist for different groups involved in a research project (funding, ethics, journals etc) provides the opportunity to save funding and administrative resources by avoiding repeated submissions of similar information. It may also flag irreconcilable conflicts, thereby avoiding investment in unpublishable studies. Importantly, it also helps to ensure that patients only participate in clinical research that can have useful outcomes.

We encourage readers to review both the ICMJE and Rochon et al documents and work with both author groups to ensure their maximal utility to the research and broader community. To this end *Open Medicine* encourages users of the checklist to complete our attached usability survey [link] seeking feedback on how well the checklist can be understood and answered as well as its comprehensiveness and relevance. While Rochon et al checklist was designed for clinical trials, its functionality and application could clearly be broader e.g., for guideline panels and other study designs. We also invite you to consider this in your responses. The authors are strongly committed to developing the best tool for managing competing interests, recognising that this an evolving process, we encourage you to be part of this exciting development.

A final consideration for authors, editors, and readers is where the checklists (completed and in progress) should reside. We believe these should be available in the public domain. If research is genuinely free from untenable competing interests, then there is no need to hide this information. We recognize that NO research is likely to be entirely conflict free – publication of the checklist opens opportunity for broadening discourse rather than pointing the finger. Rather than limiting the onus of responsibility for determining untenable competing interests with journal editors, funding bodies and ethics boards, publicly archived checklists would allow readers and other stakeholders to determine and nuance the weight they want to place on research results. Options for publication in the public domain include that the funding body or author's institution provides a public copy on their website. Alternatively, for clinical trials requiring registration, the checklist could be housed at the same registration point. Authorized persons could update checklists as a study progresses. Journal editors could also publish the checklists with associated published papers, as completed at the time of the publication, and a link to the primary archive.

Managing competing interests is vital to ensure the future integrity of research and building *public* reporting of competing interests into the research process is critical to the principles of transparency and accountability. The eye of the beholder (and perhaps journal editor) has always been considered a doubtful judge; limiting access to information about competing interests unnecessarily stymies others' efforts to evaluate them. With careful attention to competing interests throughout the research path, their declaration at publication need not open a Pandora's box.

## References

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