From the Editor

The Conflicting Meaning of Transparency

Nathan S. Blow, Ph.D.

Editor-in-Chief, *BioTechniques*

Several years ago, the editors at *BioTechniques* explored whether or not to include a more complete description of “Competing Interests” within our research articles. For a long time, any such conflicting interest statements were placed within the “Acknowledgments” section, and only if a conflict of interest was disclosed by the authors. Now, we ask all authors to include competing interest statements in their articles, regardless of whether or not a conflict exists.

The goal for us was to have greater transparency when it came to authors who might be perceived as having conflicts of interest. As a methods and techniques journal, many instances arise where authors have the intention of commercializing their approaches and methods. There is nothing wrong with the desire to commercialize a novel approach, in fact commercialization of methods and instrumentation is the surest route to getting widespread and robust adoption and implementation of tools that could rapidly advance basic and clinic research efforts. As such, these conflicts of interest should not be perceived as a negative, rather merely an additional element to report during the publication process, not unlike grant funding. And by providing this information in the form of a competing interest statement, with authors fully disclosing any possible financial interests in a particular study, readers can have an additional level of knowledge and confidence in the work.

Recently, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) came out with their guidelines on the disclosure of conflicts of interest. The new rules came out in August, after nearly a year of discussion and debate. The perceived cornerstone of these rules was to be greater transparency, more complete disclosure when it came to those academic researchers who were receiving large sums of money to consult and/or engage in studies with pharmaceutical or biotechnology companies. This was to be accomplished by universities and other institutions collecting conflict of interest data and making that information readily available to the public. But something changed during the discussions, and now that cornerstone has crumbled.

Instead of being “readily” available to the public, the data will be collected but maintained in a non-public, offline location. Interested parties can request information from a university

or institution in writing however. These institutions also have to make plans for the management of conflicts for researchers and report such plans, as well as any such conflicts, to the NIH (which did lower the reporting criteria to \$5000 from the previous \$10,000 mark in the new guidelines). But again, this information does not have to be publicly available.

While the NIH should be applauded for taking the reins and starting to deal with this issue, the latest guidelines represent a stepping-stone toward transparency. The lack of a publicly available resource to show conflicts only leads to a situation where the scientific community and the public’s trust in the work of an academic researcher or physician who collaborated with a pharmaceutical company, or received funding from such an organization, is, as before, diminished. This is neither fair to the scientific community nor the researchers themselves. Akin to competing interest statements listed in most all journals now, there is no reason why these data on conflicts of interest should not be made public in some form.

I strongly suspect this is not the last time this issue will be brought up. There will be news stories in the coming months or years describing researchers who are being paid to consult or analyze data for commercial organizations. This is not to say that such work will be tainted or might not produce novel biological insight or even help bring to market drugs that could greatly enhance human health. But there will still be question marks nonetheless, leading researchers in turn to question working with pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies. And the reason for all this will be that we apparently have to crawl before we can walk when it comes to transparency in science. Please share your thoughts with us by posting at our Molecular Biology Forums under “To the Editor” (<http://molecularbiology.forums.biotechniques.com>) or sending an email directly to the editors (bioeditor@biotechniques.com).

BioTechniques 51:147 (September 2011)

doi 10.2144/000113726

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