

Concerns about conflict of interest

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Guy Goodwin makes a plea that few if any would disagree with – namely that conflict of interest should not be confined to a declaration of links to pharmaceutical companies, and that behind the relatively superficial issue of declaring conflicts of interest lie more important principles, such as designing scientific experiments to the highest possible standards.

Concerns about conflict of interest in fact began around issues to do with government-funded research. Awareness that research funded by pharmaceutical companies might be similarly affected is recent (Healy, 2004). However, as Professor Goodwin indicates, concerns about these issues are spreading almost contagiously. For example, in the current climate, it would seem to be important for academics offering references on their peers to declare conflicts of interest.

Scientists faced with the growing complexities in these areas classically claim that, if we stick to well-designed experiments, other issues will take care of themselves. But historically, in the original scientific forums such as the Royal Society, experiments were presented literally in front of peers who had the opportunity to replicate them within days, and it was this replication that validated the design of what had been undertaken. The scientific article attempts to do the same thing, but is now typically very far removed from the experiment that it describes and is as much a rhetorical device as it is a means of demonstration. Richard Horton has written eloquently on this point.

In our day, the rhetorical importance of such articles is so clear that companies leave nothing to chance and often arrange for key articles to be ghost-written. These articles not infrequently leave out key data. It is also clear that government communications, such as the recent CSM document on antidepressants, may involve cutting and pasting into place a subset of material submitted by companies that is least problematic, apparently without any original analysis of the data. Just as Dr Goodwin is right to say that no declarations of conflict of interest can substitute for poorly designed experiments, it would also seem clear that no amount of faithful

declarations of interest can improve the quality of documents that distort the raw data from the scientific studies underpinning them.

Therefore, in addition to well-designed experiments, it is worth asking all participants in science to adhere to one of the traditional norms of science, namely to make their data available for scrutiny. Recent company postings of trial summaries on the internet fall far short of this norm.

Until raw data becomes available, one of the things that journals, scientific societies and scientific departments can do is to hold open a forum for debate. Audiences who witness competing presentations of data, and who have a chance to address the contributors, are in a position to make up their own mind as to any role that conflicts of interest may have played in the genesis of viewpoints.

The *Journal of Psychopharmacology* has been more willing to host competing viewpoints than most other journals in the field. By contrast, I recently proposed to Professor Goodwin that the issues surrounding the antidepressants were such that we would all be well served by a properly structured scientific debate hosted in Oxford. This was a debate to which I suggested the editors of the *BMJ* and the *Lancet* could be invited in the hope that a transparent presentation of data might offer these journals an opportunity to report on the merits of the competing arguments. This would enable those outside the field of psychopharmacology who are aware of a controversy, but who do not have the background to make a judgment as to whether the concerns about SSRIs represent another MMR or another Vioxx, to form an opinion on the issues. Unfortunately, Dr Goodwin declined my suggestion.

References

- Goodwin G (2004) Conflict of interest is not just about advising pharmaceutical companies. *J Psychopharmacol* 18: 447–448.
- Healy D (2004) Conflicting interests: the evolution of an issue. *Monash Rev Bioethics* 23: 8–18.

