

Case Study 10: Conflicts of Interest

Joel Beard, Chris Desjardins, Xin Zhang

Case No. 2: Industry Sponsored Research

- A major study on the side effects of a certain medication to relieve mild depression found no significant side effects except for a small fraction of the study population.
- The results of the study, which was conducted by a prestigious researcher at a prestigious university, were published in a reputable journal and noticed by media outlets, leading to increases in sales and profits for the company that sold the drug.

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- Oh, and I almost forgot: the company that sold the drug and made those profits also happened to be the company that sponsored the research, but this was not indicated in the published article or elsewhere.

The Conflict

- The interest of the company is getting positive results in order to sell more drugs and make more money.
- The interest of the researchers should be finding the truth, so there is a potential conflict if the truth is not what the company wants.
- Thus, there is a possibility that the results of the study are biased due to pressures exerted by the company on the researchers to get positive results.

The Issue

- The issue here is disclosure.
- The sponsor should have been mentioned in the publication of the research results.
- If the sponsor had been included, the research community and media reaction would have (hopefully) been more skeptical toward the positive results.

Possible Remedies

- Disclose the sponsor. (However, at this point it may be too late for this to make a difference.)
- Have an independent group conduct a study.

Is disclosure required?

- Yes. That is the whole issue.

Best way to deal with potential conflict

- Monitor research by independent body.
- Disclose sponsor in any published results and any presentation of the results.

Worst way to deal with potential conflict

- Not disclose the sponsor.
- Assume that the study results will be unbiased just because they come from a prestigious researcher at a prestigious university.

Question for further thought

- What happens if an “independent” research group is owned by the company who has a financial interest in the study results?