

Independence of Research and Conflicts of Interest

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Overview

- ❖ What are conflicts of interest?
- ❖ Examples
- ❖ Why might they be problematic?
- ❖ Examples
- ❖ Is there anything we can do about them?



Conflict of interest

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Healthcare Compliance Declarations

EPSRC, BBSRC, MRC, ARC, FCRF, EU, NIH, NIHR, CHSF,
Yorkshire Forward DePuy, CMW, DSM, Ion Bond, Zimmer, Smith and Nephew,
Sandvic, Finsbury, JRI, Corin, Synthes, Ceramtec, Mathys, Ceramcomcept,
TSL, Vacutek Terumo, BITECIC, Tissue Regenix

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Conflicts of Interests

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- ❖ What is a conflict of interest?
- ❖ Examples?



Conflict of Interests

A conflict of interest is a situation that if pursued, might prevent a professional from meeting their obligations to their employer or client.

Examples include:

- ❖ Serving in a conflicting professional role, say as a consultant or advisor for a competitor;
- ❖ Gifts, bribes, kickbacks;
- ❖ Using insider information;

Why are conflicts of interest problematic?



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Because they have the potential to distort sound judgement.

They occur when the following 2 conditions are in place:

- 1) The professional is in a relationship or role that requires sound judgement
- 2) The professional has a side interest/funding that could threaten sound judgement.

You would usually refer to the judgement of a “typical” professional in such a situation – even those who would never be swayed by interests are still in a conflict of interest.



Independence of Research?

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- ❖ Higher education institutions are under increasing economic pressures.
- ❖ Increasingly researchers are encouraged to seek financial ties, and businesses are keen to utilise the expertise that HEIs can bring to benefit society and economy.
- ❖ This “commercialisation of research” can lead to creative partnerships.
- ❖ But it also brings the risk of the distortion of objective judgement in terms of secrecy, conflicts of interests and manipulation of research results.



A Relevant Statistic

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To demonstrate how this can affect research results look at this statistic:

94% of researchers with ties to the tobacco industry found no harmful effects when they studied second-hand smoke,

13% with no such ties reported such results (Bok, 2003)

Those with sponsorship are 7 times less likely to report harmful effects of second-hand smoke.

Remember it is not just what is reported it is what is not reported also!



- ❖ In addition, corporations funding research may place stringent requirements in terms of secrecy & control over information obtained.
- ❖ How do we manage this?
- ❖ Limit secrecy agreements to a few months following the end of experiments?
- ❖ Require researchers to declare even potential conflicts of interest?
- ❖ Limit the extent to which they can invest in companies for which they do research?
- ❖ Raise awareness and share best practice?



Conflicts of Interest in HEIs

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- ❖ Conflicts of interest tend to arise when individuals & HEIs become heavily involved in lucrative research projects.
- ❖ E.g. owning large stocks of shares in companies for which one does research,
- ❖ Doing research for companies that promise large additional funding if the results favour their products.
- ❖ Acting as consultants to companies alongside research



Corporate Pressure

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Sometimes corporations exert direct pressure to influence research results.

E.g. A pharmaceutical company funded research aimed at showing its drug superior to a generic drug. Study designs. Selective reporting of results from different studies

- ❖ The researcher believed the results would support the company's hopes.
- ❖ This proved to be false.
- ❖ The company launched a legal case against the researcher.



- ❖ This pressure can lead to legal proceedings such as this case over patent rights for the synthesis of genetic information.
- ❖ This threatens further the open exchange of information and research.
- ❖ Universities can respond by patenting – but this can even serve to worsen the climate of secrecy.

What is problematic with conflicts of interest?



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Even when conflicts of interest are unavoidable or reasonable, employees are still obligated to inform their employers and obtain approval.

This suggests a fuller answer to why conflicts of interest are generally prohibited:

- 1) The professional obligation to employers is very important as it usually outweighs a majority of cases of appeal to self-interest on the job, and
- 2) Professional obligation to employers is easily threatened by self-interest (given human nature) in a way that warrants especially strong safeguards.

When should conflicts of interest be constrained?



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- ❖ If it leads to the researcher not being able to speak freely
- ❖ If it tempts them to use fraudulent means
- ❖ If it damages relations with colleagues
- ❖ If it conceals discoveries or information needed by society (e.g. had the discovery of insulin been kept secret)
- ❖ If it covers up illegal acts or the dangers of a product or process e.g. concealment of side-effects of drug
- ❖ If it hampers free communication about large areas of potential development.



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What do the University values tell us?

Academic Excellence

Integrity

Professionalism

Community

Inclusiveness