

Principled Research in the Face of Conflicts of Interest

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Declarations

- NIH Funding (CTSA, IMPAACT, PPRU)
- DSMBs for Gilead Sciences, Applied Genetic Technologies Corporation
- Unpaid consulting with GSK

Conflicts of Interest are Ubiquitous

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 - Dental work
 - Neurosurgery

COI in Life

- As humans, we understand conflicts of interest
- We internally manage and interpret COI, although we're rarely happy about it (how do you judge that neurosurgeon's recommendation?)

Definition

- A conflict of interest exists when a secondary factor has undue influence over a primary professional obligation

COI in Academic Life

- Conflicts may exist in many categories
 - Financial
 - Promotion & tenure
 - Grant support
 - Desire to publish (positive results are more likely to be published than negative)
 - Clinician's desire to have better therapeutic options for patients

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The Big Dilemma

- We can recognize a situation where COI exists
- We cannot distinguish the degree to which someone is affected by the COI – even if the “someone” is our self
- Research shows even small gifts can have significant effect
- Do big dollar amounts make someone sell their soul? (and perhaps their reputation?)

Institute of Medicine Report

- “...when individuals stand to gain by reaching a particular conclusion, they tend to unconsciously and unintentionally weigh evidence in a biased fashion that favors that conclusion. Furthermore, the process of weighing evidence can happen beneath the individual’s level of awareness, such that a biased individual will sincerely claim objectivity.” J. Dana, National Academies Press, 2009

Science

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 - Expect clear methods sections
 - Sharing of reagents
- Reproducibility less useful in clinical research
 - Clinical research is slow
 - Risks – why put more subjects at risk than necessary?
 - Expense

The Dilemma

- Academic institutions are asked to play two often contradictory roles:
 - 1) Perform research of the highest integrity
 - 2) Act as engines of economic development, spinning off new ideas (that will benefit patients) and new companies (=new jobs)
- The goal is to maintain both missions

A Related Issue...

- Most academic institutions also need to protect non-profit status (i.e. can't do non-publishable proprietary research on a contract basis)
 - Particularly true in bond-funded buildings
- There is also the fear of Grassley (and the Baylor paradigm)

Options for Management of COI

- Limit the opportunities for conflict
 - Cap payments, equity, options
- Disclosure of conflicts
 - How do you interpret a non-specific disclosure of relationship? (the infamous slide list)
 - Informed consent documents
 - Is \$1.6M different than \$16?
- Prohibit activities (like being PI)
- Oversight committees (The DSMB-Plus)

Consider

- What role will the conflicted faculty member play? Is there a managing team?
- Can the research be masked/blinded?
- How subjective are the endpoints
- Is the research multi-center?
- What are the risks to human subjects in the research?
- In balance, how important is the research for patients relative to the risk of COI?

Approach

- Define thresholds – payment / equity
- Have independent review of overlap between primary goal (the research) and 2ndary interests
- In situations with COI, consider
 - Do we allow the research?
 - If we allow it, how can we manage both the reality and appearance of a COI so research participants and academic integrity are protected?

Moral Status

- Conflicts of interest are normal
- When COIs are concealed, the viewer cannot judge their significance
- When COIs are meaningful:
 - The scientist may struggle to remain unbiased
 - In some clinical research, people may be placed at unnecessary risk
- It all begins with honesty, to your self and your institution...