American College of Epidemiology
Conflict of Interest Guidelines

1. A conflict of interest is a set of circumstances that creates a risk that judgment or actions by an epidemiologist regarding a primary interest will be unduly influenced by a secondary interest, thereby compromising normal expectations of reasonable objectivity and impartiality in regard to the other party. Such circumstances should be avoided in conducting epidemiologic investigations.

The conflict in a conflict of interest exists whether or not a particular individual is actually influenced by the secondary interest. It exists if the circumstances are reasonably believed (on the basis of past experience and objective evidence) to create a risk that decisions may be unduly influenced by secondary interests.

Epidemiologists should avoid conflicts of interest and be objective. They should maintain honesty and impartiality in the design, conduct, interpretation, and reporting of research.

2. No collaborative or contractual arrangements should ever be entered into if they produce a conflict of interest that could compromise a particular study or an epidemiologist's general reputation for objectivity.

An epidemiologist on the payroll of a corporation, a university, or a government does not encounter a conflict of interest simply by the condition of employment. However, a conflict exists whenever an epidemiologist’s role obligation or personal interest in accommodating the institution (e.g. job security, promotion) compromises responsibilities to others who have a right to expect impartial treatment.

3. The integrity of the study must not be compromised by financial interests. To assure this, investigators cannot have financial arrangements that reward a particular study outcome. Specified financial arrangements must be disclosed and epidemiologists shall not enter into agreements with companies that prevent publication of research results. Epidemiologists should not accept contractual obligations that are contingent upon reaching particular conclusions from a proposed epidemiologic inquiry.

4. Institutions that employ or contract with epidemiologists for research, education, consulting or other types of epidemiologic work have the primary responsibility to develop and enforce its own internal policies and procedures that will promote ethical professional behavior, and that will avoid any perception that research (including study design, conduct, data analysis and interpretation), teaching, professional consultation or other forms of epidemiologic work may have been biased due to individual and/or institutional conflicts of interest. The institution should designate an official to review disclosure of significant financial interest and manage conflicts of interest.

5. Epidemiologists should make a good faith effort to communicate research findings to all interested parties. It is unacceptable to fail to communicate the results of a study because they turned out to be unacceptable.
6. Upon completion of their studies, epidemiologists should provide information to colleagues adequate for critical assessment of the methods, procedures, techniques, and findings for their research through peer-reviewed publication, presentations at professional society meetings and other forums as appropriate. To facilitate the transparency and open sharing of research, epidemiologists who engage in peer-reviewing have an obligation to avoid conflicts of interest that could arise.

Examples of potential conflicts of interest for peer-reviewers might include: reviewing research that contradicts or refutes one’s own research findings; reviewing research that contradicts or is potentially damaging to one’s employer or funding agency; reviewing research authored by researchers with whom one is in direct competition for research funding or academic advancement; reviewing research that extensively cites one’s own publications; reviewing research of friends, close colleagues or supervisors. There have been attempts to mitigate these potential conflicts of interest through double blinded peer-review but this practice has remained controversial3.(see: http://www.wame.org/wame-listserve-discussions/blinded-peer-review ). It is the responsibility of the reviewer to be aware of the potential for conflict of interest and to decline reviewing when he or she cannot provide an objective, unbiased review.

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References: