Editorial: Conflict of interest—The case for avoidance and the principles for management

Colin G. Scanes, Editor-in-Chief

I am confident that the majority of research scientists meet the highest standards of scientific integrity. There are exceptions, however. Moreover, I would question how much we think about the real problem of conflict of interest. We are increasingly hearing of problems in the medical literature where an author has a conflict of interest. Does a similar situation exist in the life sciences and specifically the agricultural sciences? What is a conflict of interest? A conflict of interest is defined as follows (from the Columbia University Responsible Conduct of Research: http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/rcr/rcr_conflicts/foundation/index.html#1.1):

“A conflict of interest involves the abuse—actual, apparent, or potential—of the trust that people have in professionals. The simplest working definition states: A conflict of interest is a situation in which financial or other personal considerations have the potential to compromise or bias professional judgment and objectivity. An apparent conflict of interest is one in which a reasonable person would think that the professional’s judgment is likely to be compromised. A potential conflict of interest involves a situation that may develop into an actual conflict of interest. It is important to note that a conflict of interest exists whether or not decisions are affected by a personal interest; a conflict of interest implies only the potential for bias, not a likelihood. It is also important to note that a conflict of interest is not considered misconduct in research, since the definition for misconduct is currently limited to fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism.”

Let us consider some examples of conflicts of interest. Can we be both a principal investigator working on research funded by a specific company and be a consultant to the same company? The legal answer depends on the individual’s state law and may be either yes or no. In all cases, there is a conflict of interest. In many universities where this is legal, there are, or need to be, procedures in the institution to manage the conflict of interest. A critical element to managing conflict of interest is communication to the people we report to, thus ensuring transparency. We need to consider how the potential conflict of interest would look if it were on the front page of our regional newspaper. If it would look bad, it will look far worse to have hidden it and then have it revealed later.

What are the responsibilities of an author related to conflict of interest? Can there be a financial conflict of interest or other biases? We can readily envision a situation in which there are concerns over possible bias in the results or conclusions of studies if those studies were funded by or performed by a single company. The skepticism would be markedly greater if a relationship between the author and a company were not revealed up front but came out later. Let us consider several situations and how we should approach them.

The situation where funding came from a specific company is easy: the support of the company should be listed in the acknowledgments. This would seem to be the case with many, if not all, papers published.

What if one or more of the authors is a consultant to a company or holds a significant equity interest in a company? (Parenthetically, the threshold for a significant equity interest may be 1, 5, or 10% of the shares. It may be a judgment call or be written in statute by an individual state. Obviously, this excludes pension funds and mutual funds.) Returning to the issue, I recommend that consultantships and significant equity interests (such as in a start-up company) be declared in the acknowledgments section. This would be consistent with the need for transparency (openness) to the reader and reviewer.

What about the situation in which the publication is a review paper and the author is (or has recently been) a consultant or was funded by a specific company? Again, I would recommend that this be declared in the acknowledgments.

What about the situation where an author is holds an endowed chair or professorship funded by a specific company? Again, I would recommend declaring the link in the acknowledgments.

There are clearly cases in which a journal manuscript reviewer may have a conflict of interest or intellectual bias. I almost always encourage researchers to be reviewers. However, if there is a conflict of interest or
intellectual bias, then the reviewer has a duty to decline the invitation to review. For a journal to be successful, it needs to uphold the highest ethical standards. There are clearly roles for authors to be more transparent but it is equally important for the journal to be above reproach. For instance, it is critical to ensure that there is a “firewall” between the professional society’s fundraising/sponsorship activities and its editorial decision-making. I am confident that the Poultry Science Association board of directors and the editor-in-chief recognize their different responsibilities and the need for clear separation.