

## Conflict of Interest: The “Interest” of ASHG

The concept of “conflict of interest” (COI) is not new to the business or political communities and has been around for some time in scientific research. COI is a *situation* rather than a behavior. Only in the past several years have policies and procedures around reporting of COI emerged that recognized that these situations should be disclosed and managed. These policies and procedures have become increasingly important as scientists from the academic sector collaborate and contract with, obtain funds from, and share scientific expertise with the for-profit business sectors of the economy.

These relationships and the resulting situations are vital to the growing biomedical research enterprise, and the sharing of resources and talent is essential to the rapid advancement of basic research and its translation into clinical application. It is the misuse of resources, intellectual or tangible, that must be avoided. These complex relationships have increased concerns about the risks that might be related to financial conflicts of interest. These risks include the potential to bias research, affect study design or protocol development, compromise the dissemination of research results, and possibly diminish the public trust in biomedical research.

Timely, accurate, complete, and balanced reporting of research results are expected in the scientific community. Relationships, especially those that remain occult, may lead to the perception of COI or, more disturbingly, to the anticipation of poor behavior.

### The Principles

Investigators have the responsibility to conduct their scientific activities honestly and with the highest professional standards. The ASHG Code of Ethics states *objectivity* as a principle of integrity, affirming the need to approach professional activities with an unbiased attitude, gathering evidence and reporting results fairly and precisely.

There is one basic and unifying approach to the challenges presented by actual or perceived COI in research. That principle is: disclose, disclose, disclose. If all relationships are clearly stated and the relationships made transparent, then the underlying principles of integrity in science can be upheld. In this open milieu, COI situations can be appropriately managed.

### Institutional Policies

Under federal law, academic institutions have the authority and responsibility to establish and implement policies regarding relationships with industry. State public universities may have additional constraints under state law, as compared with private institutions. Most institutions use a peer review system to monitor these research relationships, usually under the guidance of research and development, grants and contracts, or technology transfer officials.

Every investigator’s primary obligation is to his or her employer or institution and each is responsible for following all organizational policies and procedures. Academic institutions have recognized that it is in the best interest of a university and its investigators to develop and enforce policies appropriately and con-

sistently. Although the variation among institutional policies may be challenging, the community is gaining experience and the sharing of best practices is creating a more transparent and shared knowledge base.

As a professional scientific organization, ASHG also has responsibilities in the disclosure and management of COI situations related to activities of the Society. To that end, every officer and director must complete a COI form that remains on file and available upon request.

### Annual Meeting

The most involved COI procedures for ASHG are related to the Annual Meeting. ASHG believes that it is prudent to comply with the most stringent applicable COI procedures. It is believed that this transparency promotes the most integral involvement of scientists working in all sectors of research. The implementation of COI reporting protects the integrity of the research and the investigator and therefore encourages the participation of all scientists in presenting at the annual meeting.

### Continuing Medical Education (CME) Initiatives

When applying for permission to grant CME credits for the Annual Meeting, ASHG must comply with regulations and reporting mechanisms that may seem onerous to some. In the larger context of CME, there are situations in which seminars or symposia may be presented by scientists clearly affiliated with companies, such as pharmaceutical or equipment manufacturers. In some of these cases, the relationship may not be very clear between the science presented and advertising (subtle or not). ASHG strives to avoid all compromised situations.

ASHG reports all disclosures, evaluates every presentation, and manages potential conflicts by reporting all relationships. In our case, each presentation, including invited speakers, accounts for less than 1% of the total accumulation of hours that can be credited for CME. Also, each invited speaker and at least the title of each presentation is reviewed by a peer review committee (the Program Committee) and must be deemed to be of sufficient scientific merit to be included in the program.

### New Initiative

The Program Committee and the Society leadership have agreed to adopt a policy used by many organizations for their meeting presentations. Starting in San Diego in 2007, each presenter will be required to use the second slide of the presentation (after the title slide), to disclose all reportable relationships as listed on the COI form. Explicit directions will be provided to all invited and selected speakers.

Our organization will continue to strive for the goal of providing opportunities for all scientists to share their research results in a context protected from any adverse COI situations.

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