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EDITORIAL

Conflict of Interest

Oh no! How could this happen!

I had just opened the latest issue to the book reviews. Book reviews serve an important role in achieving *Laboratory Medicine*'s mission: to fulfill the continuing education needs of laboratory professionals.

As book review editor I choose the books and other media products to be reviewed and suggest reviewers based on their area of expertise and writing ability. This reviewer was top-notch for subject knowledge and writing skills. The problem was she had recently authored a competing textbook published by ASCP Press.

There it was in black and white...a shrieking conflict of interest!

Conflicts of interest come in different shapes and sizes. A few weeks earlier, the journal had received an unsolicited, interesting, and well-written book review. Its author had written the review because *Laboratory Medicine* had requested ideas for good books to review. The reviewer said he had no financial connections with the author or publisher. He knew the book well because he uses it in the classes he teaches. He wasn't mentioned in the book. He had not submitted his review to another publication. Yet we rejected the review. We rejected it because the author of the book was the reviewer's teacher and mentor. Friendship or even antipathy to an author can affect the way a review is written, either consciously or subconsciously.

Last year I rejected an unsolicited review because the book contained a short paragraph written by the reviewer. The reviewer had no financial interest in the book, but I still saw it as a conflict of interest.

Besides a financial conflict of interest, there can be many other types of influences such as a competing interest or personal rivalry. Even a personal rivalry between authors is all right as long as the reader is informed and can make his or her own judgment of the work.

The guidelines for *Laboratory Medicine* include a blind review policy for manuscripts; reviewers of manuscripts do not know whose work they are judging. The manuscript procedure is not applicable to published books. However, reviewers are asked to disclose competing financial or other conflicts of interest they may have.

During a period of change in journal staffing, the book review by a competing author had slipped through. The author of the book wrote expressing "concern with the objectivity of the reviewer" of his book. He was right. I phoned the book's author, and my conversation with him was a very positive experience. His book is selling well. I look forward to his future activities with ASCP and submission of articles to *Laboratory Medicine*.



Joyce Z. Ioannidis, MT(ASCP), is book review editor of *Laboratory Medicine* and a member of the Editorial Advisory Board.

Joyce Z. Ioannidis

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