The Lancet's policy on conflicts of interest

As a signatory journal to the Uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals,1 how we manage conflicts of interest at The Lancet is largely based on ICMJE recommendations (ICMJE is the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors). On Sept 10, 2001, with the publication of a joint statement2 by members of ICMJE, these recommendations were substantially revised, which led us to change how we put these guidelines into practice.

For any journal, a conflict of interest exists when an author, reviewer, or editor has ties to activities that could inappropriately influence judgment. Conflicts of interest can affect the individual or be relevant to the individual’s institution; they can be personal, professional, or financial; and they can be actual (do influence judgment) or potential (could affect judgment). With the increasing links between academia and industry, medical research is becoming more dependent on commercial sponsorship to fund it and on contract research organisations to do it. The primary goal of medical research—to improve health—may be subjugated to commercial opportunities for profit or to personal gain. Conflicts are ubiquitous but what we can do is limit their effects.

Conflicts of interest matter because they can bias the research record and undermine its integrity. Conflicts can prevent results from being submitted, in total or in part. Contracts that restrict the freedom of investigators to submit findings for publication can lead to the suppression of data and limitation of academic freedom. That freedom is important to investigators, but even more so to patients who take part in research, exposing themselves to unknown risks or benefits, assuming that their data will contribute to medical science and will be published and available for public scrutiny. Medical research depends on volunteers who may, rightly, lose faith in a process that allows those with vested interests to suppress results. The Lancet therefore invites submission of protocols before a study has begun and we publish selected protocols on our website. Protocol publication encourages submission of clinically important negative findings and allows readers to check that what was done is what was planned. We support attempts to set up clinical trial registers, but such registers should either be linked, or one international, comprehensive, and accessible register is needed.

Since the beginning of 2002 we have asked for protocols to be submitted with reports of all randomised trials. The editors check that the report as submitted is an accurate reflection of the protocol. For those trials that survive clinical peer review, protocols go for statistical review with the submitted manuscripts. Since the beginning of 2002 we have consistently published conflict of interest statements from authors, together with details of the role of the funding source, as recommended by the new ICMJE guidelines (panel). We ask for these details to be included with submissions. From now on, we will ask the corresponding author to state that he or she had full access to all the data in the study and had final responsibility for the decision to submit for publication.

About 70% of submitted original research to The Lancet is rejected without external peer review. It is editors who are making these judgments and so wielding considerable power. Recognising that power, we introduced (on Nov 8) guidelines to manage editors’ conflicts of interest. After much internal discussion, we have agreed six principles (panel) that we will test in practice and modify as needed.

First, we have agreed that Lancet editors (employees who make decisions on content of the journal, which includes those involved in peer review, commissioning, writing, and subediting) should have no direct personal, professional, or financial conflict with any manuscript they might judge, edit, or commission. In practice, editors exclude themselves from any part of the decision-making process (including the alteration of content that is part of subediting) if they have any conflict of interest. For example, if an editor has collaborated with an author, is a friend of an author, or the editor’s partner has direct shareholdings in the company that makes the drug under trial, it is wise for another editor to take responsibility for the paper. Second, editors must not use information gained through working with manuscripts for private financial or personal gain. Third, editors should avoid submitting to The Lancet their own reports of original research (articles, mechanisms, or research letters). This policy differs from that of some other journals. If an editor, especially the editor-in-chief, submits a research paper to his or her own journal, it seems to us to be difficult for colleagues to make an unbiased decision about that paper, even if editors exclude themselves from decision making. Contributing editors, and other regular attendees at our weekly meeting where decisions on manuscripts are made, are not excluded from submitting original research, but should exclude themselves from meetings at which their paper is discussed. Household members of editors can submit original research, but the relevant editor should take no part in the decision-making process. Fourth, editors should avoid commissioning commentaries, seminars, reviews, or series from any member of a current editor’s household. We consider that these sections, which may be especially influential to prescribers, may also carry weight with tenure or appointment committees, and we recognise the need to avoid perceived or real favouritism. Fifth, Lancet editors should avoid accepting payment for travel, accommodation, hospitality, or gifts from anyone other than their employer. Finally, annual financial disclosure statements will be submitted to the Editor to include all honoraria, payment for travel or expenses, research funding, company ownership, direct shareholdings, or gifts.

For those papers that survive internal review, external peer review is the next stage. Our general policy is to avoid choosing reviewers from the same institution as an author, or those who are known collaborators. We consider whether it is wise, and it usually is not, to seek review from a known antagonist or supporter of the author’s work. We also rely on reviewers to tell us whether they have a conflict
of interest of any type with the submitted paper (panel). We expect reviewers to decline to review any paper with which they have a substantial conflict. For example, close personal friends or past collaborators may find it difficult to give an objective opinion. If reviewers do choose to do the review, we expect them to declare such relationships. If reviewers are unsure, we suggest that they contact the editor to discuss the nature of the conflict. If conflicts are declared, editors then decide whether to use the review or seek another if known collaborator; and consider whether wise to ask known antagonist or supporter Editors judge whether to use review or seek another

Astrid James, Richard Horton
The Lancet, London NW1 7BY, UK