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But what should journals actually do to keep industry sponsored research unbiased?

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COMMENTARY

Journals as police officers?

A timely paper from Robert Steinbrook and Jerome P Kassirer (p 811) takes the position that journals should increase the rigour required to address bias in data offered for publication from industry sponsored trials. In particular (1) the definition (currently ambiguous) of “full access to data” for the authors should be cleared up; (2) one author in the team should be truly independent of any pecuniary interest in the product and act as guarantor; (3) data must be available to editors in case of future concern, (something hopefully rarely exercised); and finally (4) there would be consequences after publication if data were found to have been misleadingly provided (presumably retractions and public disgrace). The problem is illustrated by the rosiglitazone and rofecoxib scandals; these examples could be supplemented by recent *BMJ* investigations of the drug industry’s influences on the response to the A/H1N1 influenza pandemic.¹ Some will argue with this approach.

Is it true that journals will be willing to act as police officers in this regard? Widespread criticism of some of the “big five” implies that journals themselves are influenced by the financial returns of drug companies, through the purchase of millions of reprints to be used in publicity. Nor will journal editors relish having to try and sort out data mismatches—this can be a daunting task worthy of a whole piece of research in its own right. Journal editors may thus have a right to look at primary data that is never exercised because there is such a strong disincentive to do so. And drug companies may be very good at burying any investigation with tons of documents.

Is it easy to find a truly unbiased author? For one thing, mere money is not necessarily the only influence. Getting published in a big journal may be very helpful for the academic’s career, in which case being squeaky clean from a financial point of view may not be enough to guarantee objectivity.

Even when the editor is alerted to serious concerns about blatant fraud in a paper they have published, it can be almost impossible to redress it: a paper on cardioprotective diet published in the *BMJ*² and outed decades later is a good example. The editor demanded the primary data, to be told it had been eaten by white ants. Ghostwriting is another issue that has not been discussed in this context. Much is made of the problem, but is it also a serious cause of bias? Perhaps regularly drawing the world’s attention to these scandals in order to maintain the outrage is the most important duty of journals.

Is Steinbrook and Kassirer’s analysis too one-sided? Not for my tastes, but perhaps the drug industry will want to have its say in what could be an interesting debate.

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- 1 Cohen D, Carter P. WHO and the pandemic flu “conspiracies.” *BMJ* 2010;340:c2912.
- 2 Singh RB, Rastogi SS, Verma R, Laxmi B, Singh R, Ghosh S, Niaz MA. Randomised controlled trial of cardioprotective diet in patients with recent acute myocardial infarction: results of one year follow up. *BMJ* 1992;304:1015-9.

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