

Effective Medical Writing

Pointers to getting your article published

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Conflict-of-interest, copyright and other declarations

ABSTRACT

Declarations of exclusive publication, author contribution, conflict-of-interest and copyright transfer are important formalities required by most biomedical journals. Conflict-of-interest may be personal, commercial, political, academic or financial. It is particularly important for authors to provide a full and complete disclosure of any financial relationship with a commercial organisation that may have an interest in the contents of the submitted manuscript. Editors, editorial board members and reviewers should also declare any possible conflicts-of-interest. The handling of conflict-of-interest during manuscript preparation, peer review and editorial decision-making impacts the credibility of published articles and scientific research in general.

Keyword: author contribution, conflict-of-interest, copyright, intellectual property, medical writing, scientific paper, transfer-of-copyright

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INTRODUCTION

Besides preparing a manuscript in exact accordance with the target journal's Instructions to Authors, authors should be aware that there are some basic formalities to be fulfilled during manuscript submission. Most established journals have long and comprehensive Instructions to Authors, which usually conforms to the uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals, drawn up by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE).⁽¹⁾ Authors should strive to prepare their submissions exactly according to journal requirements, so as to minimise delay in processing.

Declarations include a written statement that the manuscript has been read and approved by all authors, a

listing of individual author contributions (recommended by ICMJE), a signed conflict-of-interest statement, especially of financial interest, and a transfer-of-copyright form. Assistance from individuals who have provided writing or other service, and any funding source, should also be disclosed.⁽²⁾ Most journals expect these declarations to be completed, signed and submitted (usually by mail or fax) at specified points during the processing of the manuscript.

Box 1. Types of declarations in journals:

- Exclusive publication
- Author contribution
- Conflict-of-interest
- Transfer-of-copyright

EXCLUSIVE PUBLICATION STATEMENT

The journal editorial office will usually only consider manuscripts containing original material on the understanding that neither the article nor any part of its essential substance, tables or figures has been or will be published or submitted elsewhere before appearing in the journal. Most journals require an accompanying cover letter stating that "the manuscript has not been published previously nor is it under consideration by any other journal". There should also be a signed statement stating that the manuscript has been read and approved by all authors.

Increasingly, journals require authors to provide information about the contributions of each person named as having participated in the submitted research. These journals publish such information about individual contributions and identify the guarantor, i.e. the author responsible for the integrity of the entire work.⁽³⁾ Credit for authorship requires substantial contributions to: (a) the conception and design, or analysis and interpretation of the data; (b) the drafting of the article or critical revision

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for important intellectual content; and c) the final approval of the version to be published. Each author must sign a statement attesting that he has fulfilled the authorship criteria of the ICMJE uniform requirements.⁽¹⁾

CONFLICT-OF-INTEREST

Conflict-of-interest exists when there is a divergence between an individual's private interests (competing interests) and his responsibilities to scientific and publishing activities such that a reasonable observer might wonder if the individual's behaviour or judgement is motivated by considerations of his competing interests. Conflict-of-interest in medical publishing affects everyone with a stake in research integrity, including journals, research/academic institutions, funding agencies, the popular media and the public.⁽⁴⁾ Conflict-of-interest may be personal, commercial, political, academic or financial. Such relationships are also known as dual commitments, competing interests or competing loyalties. These relationships vary from being negligible to having great potential for influencing judgement. Although not all relationships represent true conflict-of-interest, the potential for conflict-of-interest can exist regardless of whether an individual believes that the relationship affects his scientific judgement. Financial relationships (such as employment, research funding [received or pending], consultancies, stock or share ownership, patents, honouraria, payment for travel and paid expert testimony) are the most easily identifiable conflicts-of-interest and the most likely to undermine the credibility of the journal, the authors and the scientific process. Conflicts can also occur for other reasons, such as personal relationships and academic competition. The perception of a conflict-of-interest is nearly as important as an actual conflict, since both erode trust.^(1,4)

Box 2. Types of conflicts-of-interest:

- Personal
- Commercial
- Political
- Academic
- Financial

All parties involved in the peer-review and publication process must disclose any relationships that could be interpreted as potential conflicts-of-interest. Disclosure of such relationships is also important in certain categories of articles, such as editorials, letters and review articles, because it can be more difficult to detect bias in these publication types than in original articles. Because the essence of reviews and editorials is selection and

interpretation of the literature, journal editors would expect authors of such articles to not have any significant financial interest in a company (or its competitor) that manufactures a particular product discussed in the article. Editors may use information disclosed in conflict-of-interest and financial-interest statements as a basis for editorial decisions. Editors have the right to publish this information if they believe it is important in judging the manuscript.⁽¹⁾

When authors submit a manuscript of any type, they are responsible for disclosing all financial and personal relationships that might bias their work. To prevent ambiguity, authors should state explicitly whether potential conflicts do or do not exist.⁽¹⁾ Authors should also indicate whether any writing assistance other than copyediting was provided. Some journals have specific forms with names such as financial disclosure, financial-interest, disclosure of commercial interest, conflict-of-interest acknowledgement and competing interest declaration; while for other journals, submitting a signed cover letter containing any disclosure suffices.

The ICMJE has a unified competing interest form, and recommends that a statement be constructed in the following format:⁽¹⁾ "All authors have completed the Unified Competing Interest form at www.icmje.org/coi_disclosure.pdf (available on request from the corresponding author) and declare that (1) [initials of relevant authors] have support from [name of company] for the submitted work; (2) [initials of relevant authors] have [no or specified] relationships with [name of companies] that might have an interest in the submitted work in the previous 3 years; (3) their spouses, partners, or children have [specified] financial relationships that may be relevant to the submitted work; and (4) [initials of relevant authors] have no [or specified] non-financial interests that may be relevant to the submitted work."

It is particularly important for authors submitting manuscripts to appropriately disclose any financial relationship with a commercial organisation that may have an interest in the content. The financial arrangement may be with a company whose product is pertinent to the submitted manuscript, or with a company making a competing product. For research that have been funded by external bodies, statements regarding funding; the role of the study sponsor in study design and the collection, analysis and interpretation of data, the writing of the article and the decision to submit it for publication; the independence of researchers from funders and sponsors; and the access of researchers to all the data, are required. Such information will be held in confidence while the paper is under review and will not influence the editorial decision, but if the article is accepted for publication, a

disclosure statement will usually appear with the article. Editors may request authors of a study funded by an organisation with a proprietary or financial interest in the outcome to sign a statement, such as “I had full access to all of the data in this study and I take complete responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis”.^(1,4)

Editors, editorial board members and reviewers can also have conflicts-of-interest, and should be required to declare any possible conflicts-of-interest as and when they arise, and/or on a periodic or annual basis. Although these will differ according to the level of involvement of editorial board members, they should still be addressed for all. A summary of these should ideally be published annually in the journal. Editors who are assigned to review a manuscript in which they may have a conflict-of-interest should distance themselves from that supervision, and it should be reassigned to an editor with no conflict. To increase transparency and trust, the policies that govern the management of such potential conflicts should be available to journal readers. For reviewers, non-financial competing interests may include a similar manuscript under review in the same or another journal, a similar research project nearing completion, or a close collaboration or competition with one of the authors of the manuscript. Additionally, any reviewer who might have a conflict-of-interest on a particular manuscript should be required to reveal that conflict to the editor, who will then determine the most appropriate level of his involvement. Manuscripts authored by members of the editorial board present a special instance of potential conflict-of-interest. The review of these manuscripts must always be supervised by a senior editor (deputy editor or higher), who will review the decision of the assigned decision editor for objectivity before the final decision is made.⁽⁴⁾

COPYRIGHT

The majority of journals require authors to transfer copyright to the journal or publisher upon acceptance of the manuscript. However, some journals, particularly “open-access” journals, do not require transfer of copyright. A journal’s position on copyright transfer should be made clear to authors and to others who might be interested in using the editorial content from their journals. The copyright status of articles in a given journal may vary. Some content cannot be copyrighted (e.g. articles written by employees of the United States government, or some other governments in the course of their work), while others may have the copyright waived by the editor, or they may be protected under serial rights

(i.e. use in publications other than journals, including electronic publications, is permitted).⁽¹⁾

Generally, all accepted manuscripts become the property of the journal and may not be reproduced without the permission of the publisher. All authors are expected to sign a transfer-of-copyright agreement, thereby transferring the copyright of the article to the journal or publisher, effective when the article is accepted for publication. The journal typically has the right to use, reproduce, transmit, derive works from, publish and distribute the contribution in any form or medium. Authors may not use or authorise the use of the contribution without the journal’s written consent. In the event it was necessary to include a previously published figure, table or other material in a paper, authors must obtain written copyright permission from the relevant source (publisher and/or author) prior to submission.

SUMMARY

Declarations of exclusive publication, author contribution, conflict-of-interest and copyright transfer are important formalities required by most biomedical journals. It is particularly important for authors to provide a full and complete disclosure of any financial relationship with a commercial organisation that may have an interest in the contents of the submitted manuscript. Editors, editorial board members and reviewers should also declare any possible conflicts-of-interest. The handling of conflict-of-interest during manuscript preparation, peer review and editorial decision-making impacts the credibility of published articles and scientific research in general.

Box 3. Take-home points:

1. Authors are required to complete and sign various declarations during the processing of their manuscript.
2. Providing a complete disclosure is important, particularly of financial relationships with industry.
3. Handling of conflict-of-interest impacts the credibility of published articles and scientific research.

REFERENCES

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SINGAPORE MEDICAL COUNCIL CATEGORY 3B CME PROGRAMME
Multiple Choice Questions (Code SMJ 201011A)

| | True | False |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Question 1. Regarding declarations required by journals during processing of manuscripts: | | |
| (a) They are optional for most established journals. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (b) They should be signed and approved by all authors. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (c) Ignoring them will help expedite publication of the manuscript. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (d) Declaration of individual author contributions is recommended by the ICMJE. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Question 2. The following statements are true: | | |
| (a) Any material submitted should not be under consideration for publication elsewhere. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (b) Most journals require authors to transfer copyright to the journal or publisher upon manuscript acceptance. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (c) After the transfer of copyright, authors may not use or authorise the use of their own figures or tables without the journal's written consent. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (d) Due to conflict-of-interest, editorial board members are not allowed to submit manuscripts to the journal that they are associated with. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Question 3. Types of conflict-of-interest include: | | |
| (a) Personal. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (b) Commercial. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (c) Political. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (d) Statistical. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Question 4. Financial conflicts-of-interest include: | | |
| (a) Stock ownership. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (b) Payment for travel. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (c) Paid expert testimony. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (d) Academic rivalry. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Question 5. The following may have potential conflicts-of-interest: | | |
| (a) Editor. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (b) Reviewer. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (c) Assistant editor. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (d) Departmental administrative assistant. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Doctor's particulars:

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SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS:(1) Log on at the SMJ website: <http://www.sma.org.sg/cme/smj> and select the appropriate set of questions. (2) Select your answers and provide your name, email address and MCR number. Click on "Submit answers" to submit.**RESULTS:**(1) Answers will be published in the SMJ January 2011 issue. (2) The MCR numbers of successful candidates will be posted online at www.sma.org.sg/cme/smj by 7 January 2011. (3) All online submissions will receive an automatic email acknowledgment. (4) Passing mark is 60%. No mark will be deducted for incorrect answers. (5) The SMJ editorial office will submit the list of successful candidates to the Singapore Medical Council.**Deadline for submission: (November 2010 SMJ 3B CME programme): 12 noon, 31 December 2010.**