

Conflict of Interest Policies in Science and Medical Journals: Editorial Practices and Author Disclosures

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Keywords: Conflict of Interests, Financial Disclosure, Scientists, Scientific Literature, Editors, Universities and Colleges, Industry and Education

ABSTRACT: *This study examines the extent to which scientific and biomedical journals have adopted conflict of interest (COI) policies for authors, and whether the adoption and content of such policies leads to the publishing of authors' financial interest disclosure statements by such journals. In particular, it reports the results of a survey of journal editors about their practices regarding COI disclosures. About 16 percent of 1396 highly ranked scientific and biomedical journals had COI policies in effect during 1997. Less than 1 percent of the articles published during that year in the journals with COI policies contained any disclosures of author personal financial interests while nearly 66 percent of the journals had zero disclosures of author personal financial interests. Nearly three fourths of journal editors surveyed usually publish author disclosure statements suggesting that low rates of personal financial disclosures are either a result of low rates of author financial interest in the subject matter of their publications or poor compliance by authors to the journals' COI policies.*

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Paper received, 1 October 2000; revised, 8 February 2001; accepted, 8 March 2001.

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INTRODUCTION

Prompted by a new awareness of the growth of academic-industry collaborations and author financial interests related to their research, scientific journals began introducing conflict of interest (COI) policies in the mid-1980s. Conflict of interest has been defined as a set of conditions in which professional judgment concerning a primary interest (such as patients' welfare or the validity of research) tends to be unduly influenced by a secondary interest (such as financial gain).¹

Biomedical journals were among the earliest to adopt such requirements in their "Instructions to Authors". The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, a small non-representative group of medical journal editors, has recommended both to authors and editors that financial associations that 'may pose a conflict of interest' should be disclosed.²⁻³ Recent media and journal commentaries have raised questions about how journal editors should respond to authors' personal financial disclosures.⁴⁻¹²

To date, there are no published studies on the impact of journal disclosure policies. Our 1996 pilot study of 14 leading biomedical and science journals quantified the personal financial interests of Massachusetts' authors in papers published during 1992.¹³ The results showed that 34 percent of 789 articles in the test sample had at least one lead author with a personal financial interest in the results. Since at the time few journals had COI requirements, including but one of the 14 journals in our study sample, it was not unexpected that the authors that were found to have personal financial interests in the subject of their papers did not disclose that fact in their published articles. With increasing numbers of biomedical and science journals adopting COI requirements for authors since 1992, one might expect to find higher frequencies of disclosure in subsequent years.

This paper reports on an analysis of COI policies and disclosure frequencies of author personal financial interests in biomedical and science journals for 1997, and on a survey taken of 181 editors of peer-reviewed journals on the implementation of their publications' COI policies.

METHODS

To ascertain what percentage of biomedical and science journals had personal financial disclosure policies in place during 1997, we selected a study sample of journals with demonstrated high recognition based on the analysis of journal impact factors by the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI).^a Two journal impact indicators, published in

a. A review of electronic databases such as *Index Medicus* and *Medline* showed that each review several thousand journals. As of July 1997 *Index Medicus* listed 3,209 journals while *Medline* indexed 3,854 titles. The National Library of Medicine's *Serline* data base listed 21,111 current English language periodicals as of November 1997. The American Biological Association's *Biological Abstract* covers 5,425 current titles while Elsevier's *EMBASE* indexed 3,500 biomedical journals during the period of our study; the 1996 *Science Citation Index* ranked 3,700 biomedical publications; and Ulrich's on-line data base in medicine and biology contained 29,683 publications in all languages in 1997.

ISI's Journal Citation Reports (JCR), were used in the selection: the "impact factor" [the average number of times recent articles in a specific journal were cited in the JCR cover year]¹⁴ (p.10) which is reported annually and the "times cited factor" [the cumulative number of times the article has been cited once or more by all source items],¹⁴ (pp.11-12) which is measured both annually and cumulatively.

We merged the top thousand journals listed in JCR (1996) both under "Journals Ranked by Times Cited" and "Journals Ranked By Impact Factor",^b yielding a sample of 1396 distinct high-impact science and biomedical journals (about 600 journals overlapped the two lists). We then determined which of the 1396 journals had published COI requirements for authors in effect during 1997 by reviewing the "Instructions to Authors" on the journal web sites or by checking individual volumes of the journal.^c A journal was considered to have a COI requirement for authors if its published instructions to authors states that authors are required to disclose any benefits (financial or otherwise) related to their study that accrue or might accrue to them or their institution, exclusive of the funding they receive for their research; or any relationship they may have had that might be construed as a conflict of interest with respect to the subject matter of their contributed paper. Journal COI policies in our sample varied in their disclosure requirements according to whether they included non-financial as well as financial interests and whether they focused exclusively on products. Initially, we found that 220 journals (15.8% of the study sample) had COI requirements. The list was then reduced to 181 (13.0%) journals (see Table 1, pp. 212-213) by eliminating: journals that did not have a COI policy in effect during the entire year; five journals that could not be found in any library in the Boston Metropolitan Area or at UCLA;^d and non-peer-reviewed journals. We physically examined all of the original research items in the journals (totaling 61,134) published in the test year 1997, noting all disclosures of private funding sources and personal financial interests of authors.

To determine the types of potential COIs reported in the publications, all author disclosures citing personal financial interests relevant to the published research (including consultancies, scientific advisory board memberships, stock/equity holdings, patents/inventorships, honoraria, expert witness fees, and direct employment/officer positions) were tabulated. Excluded were authors who had company affiliations in their title since that is tantamount to an explicit COI disclosure and not the subject of this

b. The ISI numerical values of the "times cited" started at 29,926 (first) and ended at 148 (one thousandth), while the numerical values of the ISI "impact factor" went from 51.00 (first) to 1.66 (one thousandth).

c. Journals vary in how they disseminate their Instructions to Authors (ITA). Some publish the ITA in each issue of the journal; others publish them in selected issues of a volume. Another group does not publish the ITA, but rather sends them to inquiring contributors.

d. The journals that were deleted because of unavailability were: *Amyloid: International Journal of Experimental and Clinical Investigation*, *Applied Immunochemistry*, *Cancer Gene Therapy*, *Journal of Cardiovascular Electrophysiology*, and *Journal of Nuclear Cardiology*.

study. We also verified whether the COI policy for each journal was in effect for the entire duration of 1997 by comparing the Internet home page listings of “Instructions to Authors” (ITA) with the ITA in published volumes.

To examine the practices of journal editors with regard to COI disclosures, we mailed a survey form (see Appendix, pp. 217-218) to the editors (one per journal) of the 181 peer-reviewed journals that we sampled for our study of journal disclosure rates and received responses from 138 editors (76.2%).^e Of the 135 known respondent journals (3 remained anonymous), 91.1% (123) are biomedical (including dentistry) and 8.9% (12) are classified as other science journals. The survey was designed to learn whether low rates of published disclosures resulted from editorial practices (editors not publishing author COI disclosures), whether journals rejected submissions because of an author COI, and whether the journals’ COI policies were broadly applied.

RESULTS

The 181 peer-reviewed journals examined by the research team published 61,134 original research items in 1997. Of the original research items, the number that contained at least one positive disclosure of an author’s personal financial interests related to the publication was 327 (0.5%; denominator 61,134). We distinguish “positive” disclosures of financial interest from “negative” disclosures, which are statements that assert authors have no financial interests. While disclosure of “no financial interests” is a disclosure, for purposes of consistency in this study, only the statements that asserted positive financial interests were recorded as primary data. Our final tally of 0.5 percent personal disclosures of financial interest in the peer-reviewed journals excludes cases of such negative disclosures (e.g., no benefits were or will be received from a commercial party related to the subject of this article) because, unlike positive disclosures, they were required only by a small number of journals. Statements of consultancies for and stock/equity holdings in companies that are involved in product development in areas close to the author’s research were most frequently cited in disclosures.

One-hundred-nineteen of the 181 journals (65.7%), comprising 58.1 percent of the articles examined, published no (0%) positive disclosures of authors’ personal financial interests. Thirty-seven journals (20.4%) had such disclosures in 1% or less of the original research items published in their journals. The rates of published positive disclosures of personal financial interests for the remaining journals are given in Table 2 (page 214).

In our review of journal conflict-of-interest policies we discovered that six of the 181 journals we examined for this study (3.3 %) used a standardized template to elicit information on whether the author or the author’s institution benefited financially from

e. The survey was certified as exempt from Human Subject Protection Committee review by the Office of Protection of Research Subjects at the University of California, Los Angeles.

the research. We use the phrase “template journals” to characterize a group of journals that require authors to choose among a set of standardized statements regarding the financial interests of all coauthors, and that publish the author’s response in each article in the form of statements or symbols. The six “template journals” in our sample are: *Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery* (both the American and British volumes), *Journal of Hand Surgery* (American volume), *Journal of Refractive Surgery*, *Investigative Ophthalmology and Visual Science*, and the *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation*. For example, the *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation* asks authors to select one of four statements on financial interest: one response indicates that financial interests accrue directly to authors; a second states that the financial interests accrue to organizations with which the authors are affiliated; a third states that the results of the research will not benefit the author(s) or their organization, and the fourth indicates that the author(s) has/have chosen not to select a disclosure statement.

The American and British volumes of the *Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery* both require contributors to check one of five options, the last of which asserts that the authors choose not to furnish disclosure information. Both the *Journal of Refractive Surgery* and *Investigative Ophthalmology & Visual Science* provide templates with specific categories of financial interests, seven for the former and 17 for the latter.

Five of the “template journals”, all except the *Journal of Hand Surgery*, were among the ten journals with the highest rates of positive disclosures; however the template responses required by them gave no specificity about the authors’ financial relationships.

The six “template journals” had total rates of disclosure (positive plus negative) that were much higher than any of the other journals. However, five of the six do not require the authors to disclose the names of commercial entities with which they or their institutions have an interest or to disclose the specific nature of that interest. Also, authors in three of the template journals may check a response that states “we choose not to select a disclosure statement”. Among the three journals with this option, only 7 papers (1%) published in 1997 cited this non-disclosure option. This suggests that journals requiring a standardized response to financial disclosure have a very high participation rate among authors. We consider the response category, “we choose not to select a disclosure statement”, as a proxy for “we do not wish to participate in financial disclosure”.

In the survey of journal editors, 72.4% (71, n=98) reported that they rarely or never discuss with authors (or decide jointly with authors) whether a COI disclosure should be published; and 73.7% (84, n=114) of the editors reported that they always or almost always publish such disclosures while 10.5% (12, n=114) never do so (see Table 3, page 215).

A majority of responding journal editors (60.2%, 77, n=128) have never rejected a submitted manuscript based primarily on COI, but 18.8% (24, n=128) have done so primarily for that reason and 19.5% (25, n=128) have done so but only in conjunction with other factors (see Table 4, page 216).

Table 5 (page 216) shows the responses of editors to questions concerning who receives and who supplies COI information. About one third of the journals request conflict-of-interest information from peer reviewers (35.6%; 47, n=132), while nearly half the journals (48.8%; 62, n=127) require such information from their editors.

CONCLUSION

Based on our sample of 1396 high impact journals, we found that 15.8 percent had a published policy on conflicts of interest during 1997. In our sub-sample of 181 peer-reviewed journals with COI policies, 87 percent were medical journals (n=157) and 13 percent (n=24) were science journals. In contrast, medical journals made up only 34 percent (n=474) of our original sample of 1396 high impact journals. We believe the reason for the higher percentage of medical journals with COI requirements is that medical research receives greater public scrutiny and media attention compared to basic science. As a result, medical journal editors have become more responsive to disclosing in publications even the appearance of a conflict of interest held by a contributor. By the mid-1990s one survey found that as many as 34 percent of all medical journals and 46 percent of U.S. medical journals with circulation over 1,000 reported they had written COI policies for contributing authors.^f

In our sample of peer reviewed journals that had published COI policies in effect throughout 1997 we found that 0.5 percent (n=327) of the original research items (n=61,134) had, at least, one positive disclosure of personal financial interests by an author, while 65.7 percent of the journals had zero positive disclosures of author personal financial interests during that year. Our survey of journal editors reveals that the vast majority usually publish author disclosure statements suggesting that low rates of personal financial disclosures are either a result of low rates of financial interest (nothing to disclose) or poor compliance among authors to the journals' COI policies. Based on the previously mentioned pilot study,¹³ higher disclosure rates in the template journals, and the growth of commercialization in the biomedical sciences,¹⁵⁻¹⁸ we believe that poor compliance is the more likely explanation for low disclosure rates in most journals with COI policies. The approach taken by the "template journals", while sacrificing detail on the specific nature of the financial interests involved in exchange for the more generalized alert to readers, deserves greater consideration by editors.

f. Glass, R. M. A survey of journal conflict of interest policies. A talk given at the Third International Congress on Peer Review in Biomedical Publication, Prague, The Czech Republic, September 18, 1997. The survey was sent to 1251 medical journals, excluding dentistry, nursing and medical sciences, with circulation over 1,000 as listed in Ulrich's 1994 guide; 648 responses were reported.

Acknowledgments: This research was supported in part by a grant from the Greenwall Foundation. Some preliminary results of this paper were reported on January 25, 1999 at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Anaheim, California. The authors wish to acknowledge with gratitude the research assistance of Sharon Wolfson and Darcy Byrne. While this paper was in preparation, Dr. Krimsky served as an expert witness in a legal case involving scientific integrity and conflict of interest. None of the journals discussed in this paper or their editors are parties to the case.

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Table 1
Journals Analyzed and Surveyed

Accounts of Chemical Research	Cancer
AIDS	Cancer Epidemiology: Biomarkers and Prevention
American Heart Journal	Cancer Research
American Journal of Clinical Pathology	Cell Growth & Differentiation
American Journal of Medicine	Chemical Research in Toxicology
American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology	Chemistry of Materials
American Journal of Ophthalmology	Chest
American Journal of Orthodontics and Dentofacial Orthopedics	Circulation
American Journal of Physiology	Circulation Research
American Journal of Psychiatry	Clinical Cancer Research
American Journal of Public Health	Clinical Chemistry
American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine	Clinical Pharmacokinetics
American Journal of Respiratory Cell and Molecular Biology	CMAJ-Canadian Medical Association Journal
American Journal of Surgery	Critical Care Medicine
American Journal of Tropical Medicine & Hygiene	Current Eye Research
Analytical Chemistry	Diabetes
Anesthesia & Analgesia	Diabetes Care
Anesthesiology	Drug Development Research
Annals of Emergency Medicine	Drug Metabolism & Disposition
Annals of Internal Medicine	Drugs
Annals of Neurology	Environmental Science and Technology
Annals of Thoracic Surgery	Epidemiology and Infection
Antiviral Research	Epilepsia
Archives of General Psychiatry	European Heart Journal
Archives of Internal Medicine	European Journal of Endocrinology
Archives of Neurology	European Journal of Vascular Surgery
Archives of Ophthalmology	European Respiratory Journal
Archives of Otolaryngology	FASEB Journal
Archives of Pathology & Laboratory Medicine	Fertility and Sterility
Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation	Gastroenterology
Archives of Surgery	Gastrointestinal Endoscopy
Arteriosclerosis Thrombosis and Vascular Biology	Gynecologic Oncology
Arthritis & Rheumatism	Heart (formerly British Heart Journal)
Behavioural Pharmacology	Hepatology
Biochemistry	Human Reproduction
Bioconjugate Chemistry	Hypertension
Biological Psychiatry	Infection Control and Hospital Epidemiology
Bone	Inorganic Chemistry
British Journal of Haematology	Investigative Ophthalmology & Visual Science
British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology	JAMA—Journal of the American Medical Association
British Journal of Radiology	JMRI—Journal of Magnetic Resonance Imaging
British Journal of Surgery	Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry
British Medical Journal	Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology
Canadian Journal of Anaesthesiology	Journal of Applied Physiology
Canadian Journal of Microbiology	Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery-American Volume
	Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery-British Volume

Journal of Chemical and Engineering Data
Journal of Chemical Information and Computer Sciences
Journal of Clinical Investigation
Journal of Clinical Neurophysiology
Journal of Clinical Oncology
Journal of Clinical Psychiatry
Journal of General Physiology
Journal of Gerontology
Journal of Hand Surgery
Journal of Hepatology
Journal of Hypertension
Journal of Internal Medicine
Journal of Investigative Dermatology
Journal of Investigative Medicine
Journal of Medicinal Chemistry
Journal of Natural Products
Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery & Psychiatry
Journal of Neuropathology and Experimental Neurology
Journal of Neurophysiology
Journal of Neurosurgery
Journal of Nuclear Medicine
Journal of Nutrition
Journal of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery
Journal of Organic Chemistry
Journal of Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition
Journal of Pediatrics
Journal of Periodontology
Journal of Pharmaceutical Sciences
Journal of Physical and Chemical Reference Data
Journal of Physical Chemistry
Journal of Prosthetic Dentistry
Journal of Refractive Surgery
Journal of Rheumatology
Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology
Journal of the American Chemical Society
Journal of the American College of Cardiology
Journal of the American College of Surgeons
Journal of the American Dental Association
Journal of the American Dietetic Association
Journal of the American Geriatrics Society
Journal of the National Cancer Institute
Journal of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery
Journal of Trauma-Injury, Infection & Critical Care
Journal of Urology
Journal of Vascular Surgery
JPEN—Journal of Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition
Langmuir
Laryngoscope
Lasers in Surgery and Medicine
Lipids
Macromolecules
Medical Care
Medical Journal of Australia
Medicine
Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise
Modern Pathology
Molecular Pharmacology
Muscle & Nerve
Neurology
Neuropsychopharmacology
Neuroreport
New England Journal of Medicine
Obstetrics and Gynecology
Ophthalmology
Organometallics
Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery
PACE—Pacing and Clinical Electrophysiology
Pain
Pediatric Infectious Disease Journal
Pediatric Research
Pediatrics
Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery
Preventive Medicine
Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA
Proceedings of the Society for Experimental Biology and Medicine
Psychiatric Services
Psychopharmacology
Psychosomatics
Radiology
Science
Seminars in Hematology
Seminars in Oncology
South African Medical Journal
Southern Medical Journal
Spine
Stroke
Surgery
The Lancet
Transfusion
Transplantation

Table 2
Rates of Author Personal Financial Disclosure in 1997 Journals (n= 181)

Personal Financial Disclosures (percent interval) ^a	Number of Journals (n = 181)	Percent of Total	Number of Articles (n= 61,134)	Percent of Total
0	119	65.7	35,498	58.1
>0 - 1	37	20.4	19,199	31.4
>1 - 2	12	6.6	2,931	4.8
>2 - 3	3	1.7	1,088	1.8
>3 - 4	2	1.1	516	0.8
>4 - 5	2	1.1	471	0.8
>5 - 6	0	0.0	0	0.0
> 6 - 7	1	0.6	298	0.5
> 7 - 8	1	0.6	349	0.6
> 8 - 9	1	0.6	314	0.5
> 9 - 10	0	0.0	0	0.0
> 10	3	1.7	470	0.8

^a Indicates the number of journals and articles whose rates of positive personal financial disclosures fall within designated intervals. The percentage for each journal is calculated by dividing the number of articles that have at least one published personal financial disclosure by the total number of original research articles published by the journal during 1997.

Table 3
Editorial Practice on Receipt of Personal Financial Interest Disclosures

3-A: Discuss with author and decide jointly

1 = Sometimes (but rarely)	46	(46.9%)
2 = Usually (almost always)	18	(18.4%)
3 = Always (can't think of an exception)	9	(9.2%)
4 = Never	25	(25.5%)

n = 98

3-B: Make an independent determination with/without additional author information

1 = Sometimes (but rarely)	25	(24.3%)
2 = Usually (almost always)	43	(41.7%)
3 = Always (can't think of an exception)	17	(16.5%)
4 = Never	18	(17.5%)

n=103

3-C: Publish author disclosure statements of private financial interests.

1 = Sometimes (but rarely)	18	(15.8%)
2 = Usually (almost always)	20	(17.5%)
3 = Always (can't think of an exception)	64	(56.1%)
4 = Never	12	(10.5%)

n = 114

Table 4
Rejection of Manuscripts Based on Conflicts of Interest

Have you or your journal ever rejected a submitted manuscript based primarily on potential financial conflict of interest?

Yes, primarily for that reason	24	18.8%
Yes, in conjunction with other factors	25	19.5%
No	77	60.2%
Options 1 & 2	1	0.8%
Options 1,2, & 3	1	0.8%

n=128

Table 5
Sharing of Financial Interest Disclosure*

Do you share with reviewers financial interest disclosures:	YES	NO
contained only in cover letters? (n=102)	37 (36.3%)	65 (63.7%)
contained in the submitted manuscript? (n=121)	93 (76.9%)	28 (23.1%)
Do you expect the peer reviewers to use financial interest information in their evaluation of manuscripts? (n=103)	56 (54.4%)	47 (45.6%)
Is it the practice of your journal to request financial conflict of interest information from:		
peer reviewers? (n=132)	47 (35.6%)	85 (64.4%)
editors? (n=127)	62 (48.8%)	65 (51.2%)
Do you ask reviewers or editors to disqualify themselves if they perceive a potential conflict of interest? (n=104)	77 (70.0%)	27 (26.0%)

* "n" designates the number of editors responding to the specific question.

* The survey was carried out in December 1998

APPENDIX
Survey Questionnaire

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE. Please return it by December 24, 1998. You may return this questionnaire in the enclosed envelope, or by fax to +1-310-206-8622, or send the responses by e-mail to lsr@ucla.edu

We have attached what we believe to be the financial disclosure and/or potential conflict of interest policy in effect at your journal during the 1997 calendar year.

1. Was the attached policy in effect for the entire calendar year of 1997?
____ YES ____ NO

2. Were there any supplemental, unpublished instructions on disclosure of financial interests that your journal sent to authors during that period?
____ YES ____ YES, only when indicated ____ NO

If you answered YES to question 2, we would be most grateful if you could furnish a copy of those instructions to us.

3. If you know the answer without doing research, in what year did your journal adopt financial disclosure requirements for authors (specifically, private interests such as honoraria, company equity interests, scientific advisory board membership, etc.)? _____
Any modifications subsequent to that year? _____

4. Indicate which practice(s) most closely reflect(s) that of your journal when you receive a statement of private financial interest from an author(s):

a) discuss the statement with the author(s) and decide jointly as to whether it should be published.

____ SOMETIMES (but rarely) ____ USUALLY (almost always)
____ ALWAYS (I can't think of an exception) ____ NEVER

b) make an independent determination regarding publication with or without seeking additional information from the author(s).

____ SOMETIMES (but rarely) ____ USUALLY (almost always)
____ ALWAYS (I can't think of an exception) ____ NEVER

c) publish author disclosure statements of private financial interests.

____ SOMETIMES (but rarely) ____ USUALLY (almost always)
____ ALWAYS (I can't think of an exception) ____ NEVER

d) use another technique described as

____ SOMETIMES (but rarely) ____ USUALLY (almost always)
____ ALWAYS (I can't think of an exception) ____ NEVER

5. Have you or anyone else at your journal ever rejected a submitted manuscript based primarily on potential financial conflict of interest?

- YES (primarily for that reason)
- YES (but only in conjunction with other factors)
- NO

If so, please estimate approximately how many times this has occurred and over how long a period of time. _____

6. Is it a practice at your journal to share with peer reviewers the financial interest disclosures contained:

- a) only in authors' cover letters?
 YES NO
- b) in the submitted manuscript
 YES NO

If so, do you expect your peer reviewers to use financial interest information in their evaluation of manuscripts?

- YES NO

7. Is it the practice at your journal to request potential conflict of interest information from:

- a) peer reviewers YES NO
- b) editors YES NO

If not, do you ask reviewers or editors to disqualify themselves if they perceive a potential conflict of interest regarding the submission? YES NO

Additional comments or explanation:

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME

_____ Please send me any preliminary results from your study that pertain to my journal.

_____ Name

_____ Title

_____ Journal