



# Evaluating Conflicts of Interest

Part of the HeaRT training package for health journalists,  
Summer 2012

## Different levels

- Can affect sources and expert commentators, but also editors and news media owners.
- **Experts and analysts** commenting on public healthcare systems - themselves having commercial financial or political links with private sector providers or insurance companies.
- **The pharmaceutical industry** influences doctors and academics whether as individuals or through whole departments and institutions.

## Lack of genuine independence

- **Experts** may comment on rival companies or providers while linked to other competitors.
- **Editors and news media owners** can face conflicts of interest between their role in delivering information for the wider public, while also wanting to please advertisers, sponsors, or related companies
- There are conflicts of interest for **public sector bodies** engaging in contracts shrouded in **commercial confidentiality** with private companies while in theory being committed to **transparency and engagement** with the public.

## More conflicts of interest

- **Doctors** working in both the public sector and in private practice, may be happy to see **long waiting lists** for publicly funded treatment or **treatments excluded** from the NHS because it helps build up demand for more lucrative **private work**.
- Doctors **using NHS resources** (including their own time and NHS facilities, equipment, or staff) **to deliver private treatment**.
- **Ministers** whose government is imposing cuts, forcing the closure of local health services, trying to be seen opposing unpopular cuts that affect their own electoral constituency.

## But don't forget another conflict

- Journalists want stories that count high in news values for their target audience
- They want good news on research and cures
- Happy to focus on bad news on health systems
- They want simple news (and therefore try to simplify sometimes carefully nuanced reports and findings)
- They have little time to read and research and may not have medical knowledge, so tend to depend on press releases rather than full reports
- This is not the same agenda as honest researchers



## Do we allow for calculated risk?

- Are **all** conflicts of interest unacceptable?
- Are **all** drug company-sponsored events and activities harmful and to be avoided by doctors and others? (HeaRT website partly sponsored by Pfizer!)
- Can doctors bring sufficient critical awareness to **separate** the important **information** from the **hype and spin**?
- Are **alternative sources of unbiased information** on new drugs and treatments readily available? If not, how are doctors and professionals to form views on them?

# Does peer review eliminate the problem?

- Journalists tend to defer to the authority of peer-reviewed journals
- But these may themselves be subject to external pressures equivalent to conflict of interest (drug companies etc potentially ordering reprints of articles with positive coverage, etc)
- “An editor may thus face a frighteningly stark conflict of interest: publish a trial that will bring \$100,000 of profit or meet the end-of-year budget by firing an editor.”
  - (Smith R (2005) Medical journals are an extension of the marketing arm of pharmaceutical companies. PLoS Med 2(5): e138.)

## Lancet editor Richard Horton identified 10 problems

- 1. Manipulation of research findings
- 2. Bias toward positive findings in sponsored studies
- 3. Undisclosed adverse data
- 4. Hiding negative data
- 5. **Supplement publishing:** Journal supplements often represent little more than information-laundering operations for industry. A company will sponsor a promotional meeting, and then seek to publish the papers as a non or lightly peer-reviewed supplement to an established journal, “buying, not earning, the imprint of the journal on its marketing-driven symposium”.



# Horton evidence 2004

- 6. **Undisclosed conflicts of interest:** “the continuing privatisation of much of science threatens to make independent research almost impossible to do.”
- 7. Editorial kick-backs
- 8. **Ghost-writing:** pharmaceutical companies seed the medical literature with ghostwritten editorials, reviews, and opinion pieces: a company friendly expert is then paid to have his or her name appear on the article.
- 9. **Continuing medical education:** Industry is now a major sponsor of medical "education". A former editor of the NEJM, Marcia Angell, estimates that about 60% of CME in the US is paid for by industry.
- 10. Failure to align commercial with public interests.



## To avoid being used, check, query, check again

- Where does your information come from? Is it an organisation, an expert, a pressure group?
- What interests do they say they represent?
- Who funds them? Who is in charge?
- What are their affiliations – commercial, political, etc.
- If they are experts, is this their field of expertise? And are their facts & figures correct?









