Editor's Note

Global Theme Issue on Aging:
October, 1997

In January 1996, 36 journals from 21 countries published 243 articles on "Emerging Microbial Threats" as a global theme. This publication of multiple articles on a single theme was a resounding success. Therefore, led by Dr. George Lundberg of the Journal of the American Medical Association, a new and different global theme was solicited for 1997. After multiple iterations of voting among editors-in-chief of medical journals, the theme of "Aging" was selected. This October issue of CHEST has attempted to publish articles dealing with aging together with other journals around the world. To date, 90 other journals from 33 countries have participated in this global theme venture. CHEST is proud to be a part of this international effort. Papers related to this theme can be found on pages 875, 885, 895, 1029, 1115, 1117, 1120, 1124, and 1127 of this issue.

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Conflict of Interest and Financial Disclosure

Judge the Science, Not the Author

Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines conflict of interest as "a conflict between the private interests and the official responsibilities of a person in a position of trust." In the peer review publishing arena of CHEST, the "position of trust" is that of author, reviewer, referee, or editor. The "private interests" can be financial, professional, academic, ethical, and even political. The "official responsibilities" comprise the authors reporting results of scientific research and/or medical practices, reviewers assessing the quality and relevance of that report, referees making a decision on a paper when two reviewers disagree, and the editor-in-chief making decisions on journal policy and acceptance and rejection of reports, editorials, letters, and reviews.

Most medical and scientific journals (CHEST included) have rules intended to define and control the disclosure of factors that contribute to conflicts of interest. Money is often the biggest and most convenient focus because it is concrete—easily measurable and easily defined. More abstract conflicts are difficult to define and therefore are more difficult, if not impossible, to measure—and prove. CHEST (and many other journals) requires that authors disclose any financial interests that could possibly have influenced their judgment about anything discussed in their paper. CHEST provides reviewers with this information to consider as they make their decision on a paper. If the paper is accepted, CHEST publishes the disclosure in the article footnote, intended to alert readers to any potential conflicts of interest.

Guilty Until Proven Innocent?

A criticism of the above-described convention is that the journals are treating authors as guilty until proven innocent. It is possible that by requiring disclosure, providing it to reviewers, and publishing it, journals (and readers) are essentially finding the authors guilty by association. The journal publishes the "confession" of financial disclosure as proof that the author was reimbursed by someone during the scientific process, planting a seed of doubt in the reader's mind that what is reported may not be completely accurate or may be biased. The reader may automatically question the study's validity—and perhaps the author's integrity. But do disclosure states warrant questioning a study's validity? I think not. Instead of questioning the study or the author, the distinction must be made between potential conflict and conflict that actually exists.

Potential conflicts of interest are encountered every day at the CHEST editorial office. This is easy