How Japanese Medical Journals Manage Conflicts of Interest

To the Editor:

Conflict of interest (COI) is an issue in all of scientific publishing, and handling cases of potential COI appropriately is one of journal editors’ constant concerns. Understanding the importance of COI, the Japanese Association of Medical Societies (JAMS) directly addressed it at a symposium held in February 2014. We created a questionnaire to gather data on COI disclosure and management to present at that event.

Results were obtained from all of the 118 journal-publishing medical societies (121 journals) belonging to the JAMS. COI guidelines and disclosure instructions had been slowly introduced from about 2005, and approximately 67% of journals had begun describing the necessity of COI disclosure in their instructions to authors by 2010. Only 24 journals (19.8%) made efforts to check the accuracy of COI information provided by authors. In cases of incomplete COI disclosure statements, only 51.7% of journals would ask the author for clarification. Furthermore, only 60 journals (49.6%) require their editorial committee members to disclose their own COI on appointment, and education or training on the significance of COI disclosure was given to reviewers and editorial committee members by only 35 journals (28.9%).

Overall, the results show that in Japan, while the issue of COI is well known, it is neither understood nor managed sufficiently. Policies regarding COI management are inconsistent among journals, and many societies are unsure about actual management, despite publishing COI guidelines in their instructions to authors.

We could not help but notice that the response rate from the journal offices was 100% and that many of those attending the symposium expressed, informally, a lack of confidence regarding COI management. That combination indicates a need for wider implementation of internationally recognized guidelines, such as the flowcharts produced by the Committee on Publication Ethics. We also see a need for education not only of all active clinical researchers but also of editorial committee members and journal staff.

The details of COI management in other parts of the world are unknown. In the interest of ensuring the quality and credibility of published research, we believe that to appropriately manage the disclosure of potential COI of authors, reviewers, editors, and editorial board members, all medical publishers should do what the JAMS member societies have done: Examine and publicly reveal not only official policies but also actual practices.

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