

HEAD TO HEAD

Should journals sell reprints? No

Jane Smith (doi:10.1136/bmj.d6428) argues that stopping journals selling reprints will not benefit research or readers, but **Tom Jefferson** sees the competing interests as a serious problem

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Although I am far from wanting to stop honest hardworking publishing and editing folk from earning a crust by selling reprints of content of their journals, the matter is not quite as straightforward as a yes or no debate. In 2009 the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) published a new format for the disclosure of conflicts of interest.¹ The new format was launched with an editorial signed by some of the most powerful names in medical publishing.² The rules require anyone submitting an article to any of the journals to make a detailed disclosure of any financial or non-financial ties “that a reasonable reader would want to know about in relation to the submitted work.”¹ The rationale for disclosure is stringent, as Drazen and colleagues describe in the editorial: “The information provided in these disclosures helps the reader to understand the relationships between the authors and various commercial entities that may have an interest in the information reported in the published article.”²

These are important steps in the right direction. However, readers could also be helped in their understanding of the articles and the decisions leading to publication if not just authors but editors and publishers were required to fill in an equivalent form indicating sources and amounts of revenue for the previous year. As the ICMJE website explains, “All participants in the peer-review and publication process must disclose all relationships that could be viewed as potential conflicts of interest.”¹ That includes editors and publishers. The ICMJE statement recommends that “Editors should publish regular disclosure statements about potential conflicts of interests related to the commitments of journal staff” but omits to make any mention of sources of revenue for the journal, despite the fact that selling reprints to industry is a major source of revenue for journals.

Industry bias

Let me explain why this is important. In 2009 we published a systematic review of 259 studies of influenza vaccines published up to the end of 2007.³ We looked at several aspects of these studies, such as methodological quality (including internal coherence of the papers such as whether conclusions matched

data presented), sources of funding, journal impact factors, and crude article citation rates.

Among our various findings was a strong association between industry funding and publication of a study in a high impact factor journal with consequent higher citation rate compared with non-industry funded studies. Some study characteristics (such as size and low quality) were the same for industry and non-industry funded studies. But industry studies were more likely to over-emphasise positive outcomes (a well known phenomenon). We did not include registration trials of new vaccines (which you would expect to attract more interest than confirmatory studies) because they reported surrogate outcomes such as antibody titres.³ We also found a growing trend for industry funded studies of influenza vaccines to be published in prestigious journals in the previous 20 years. If quality and size were not the key factors determining which trials ended up in the more prestigious journals, what could explain this finding? Could the journals themselves have a role in this phenomenon?

Drazen, editor in chief of the high impact factor *New England Journal of Medicine*, confirms the increasing reliance on reprint revenues. Speaking at the 2008 meeting of the Massachusetts Medical Society (which publishes the journal), Drazen said: “The results in recruitment advertising and bulk reprints were outstanding this year; they went a long way to offset declines in print-based revenue that all publishers are experiencing.”⁴ We know that some large journals derive up to 40% of their income from the reprint business.⁵

Openness is key

The value of reprints to a publisher can be gauged by comparing the actual per page cost of printing 100 000 copies of an article with coloured covers as part of a bulk order at your local office supply store (about €0.02 (£0.02; \$0.03)) with the average cost of ordering a similar number of reprints from learned publishers (around €0.26 per page, excluding VAT and delivery). The figures are from my own survey of eight journals from four major publishers. Of course, larger journals are caught on the horns of a dilemma. They are the ones receiving more submissions and have high rejection rates. This means a larger

staff and higher costs. Some journals and publishers have diversified by going into conferencing, events, and industry support (including the recruitment and development of key opinion leaders).

Reprints (especially those bearing the cover of a prestigious journal) are the currency of marketing. How many readers have been approached by drugs sales staff bearing gifts and a copy of the latest paper showing their product to be superior to that of their competitors?

All of this shows that large journals and large publishers are businesses. I am a reasonable reader as well as a producer of research. You can sell me what you want, but please tell me what I am buying. Editors and publishers should fill in an equivalent form indicating their sources of revenue for the previous year and the relative amounts.

Statements such as “This journal reports receiving reprint orders from Wonderpharma Ltd over the last year in excess of \$250 000” would be a good start. An itemised disclosure by article or product would be even better. Just like the one that authors have to fill in.

Competing interests: The author has completed the ICJME unified disclosure form at www.icmje.org/coi_disclosure.pdf (available on request from him) and declares no support from any organisation for the submitted work; no financial relationships with any organisation that might have an interest in the submitted work in the previous three years; TJ produces research and has an interest in a level playing field.

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

- 1 International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals. ethical considerations in the conduct and reporting of research: conflicts of interest. www.icmje.org/ethical_4conflicts.htm.
- 2 Drazen JM, Weyden MBVD, Sahni P, Rosenberg J, Marusic A, Laine C, et al. Disclosure of competing interests. *BMJ* 2009;339:b4144.
- 3 Jefferson T, Di Pietrantonj C, Debalini MG, Rivetti A, Demicheli V. Relation of study quality, concordance, take home message, funding, and impact in studies of influenza vaccines: systematic review. *BMJ* 2009;338:b354.
- 4 Massachusetts Medical Society. 2008 annual report. Chapter 58. MMS, 2008:10.
- 5 Lundh A, Barbateskovic M, Hrobjartsson A, Gotzsche PC. Conflicts of interest at medical journals: the influence of industry-supported randomised trials on journal impact factors and revenue—cohort study. *PLoS Med* 2010;7: e1000354.

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