

This is the unedited version of the Media Bites column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in June 2000. The published version may have had minor changes.

Media Bites: DEALING WITH CONFLICT

John Laws may have stolen the limelight in public discussion of the pitfalls of conflict of interest, but it's an issue which affects us all in ways great or small.

Even that most illustrious of publications, *The New England Journal of Medicine*, has been bothered by the subject. When the journal recently published a study of treatments for depression, it found that the authors had such extensive ties with antidepressant manufacturers there was not enough room to publish the details in full.

The journal also had trouble finding a independent expert to write an editorial on the study - its policy is that editorialists and authors of review articles should not have any financial connection with a company that benefits from a product discussed in the article.

“The problem is by no means unique to psychiatry,” wrote editor-in-chief Dr Marcia Angell in a provocative editorial, *Is Academic Medicine for Sale?* “We routinely encounter similar difficulties in finding editorialists in other specialties, particularly those that involve the heavy use of expensive drugs and devices.”

The journal is particularly sensitive about conflict of interest, having itself been embarrassed on the issue, despite its strict disclosure laws.

In 1996, it published an apology over an editorial on appetite-suppressant drugs after discovering that the editorialists had been paid consultants for a company that stood to gain from the sale of one of the drugs mentioned.

There were more blushes last October, thanks to a *Los Angeles Times* investigation of 36 review articles on drug therapy published in the NEJM since 1997. It identified eight articles by researchers with undisclosed financial links to drug companies that marketed treatments evaluated in the articles.

A subsequent internal investigation identified 18 such instances, and in February the journal apologised again for breaching its own editorial policies, noting that the authors had done the right thing initially in telling the journal of their ties.

Another perspective on such matters was published in the journal two weeks ago. Australian journalist Ray Moynihan, in collaboration with researchers in the United States and Australia, analysed the coverage of pravastatin, alendronate and aspirin in 207 stories which appeared in the US media between 1994 and 1998.

Many of the findings will not surprise students of media - the coverage was largely positive, with only 47 per cent of stories mentioning potential risks. Most of those stories which quantified the benefits of treatment reported these in relative rather than absolute terms - an approach which is more likely to generate enthusiasm for treatment.

And most of the stories which quoted an expert with industry ties did not mention these - the study did not specifically examine whether this was because the ties were not initially disclosed by the experts.

Moynihan and co hope their findings will encourage the media to become more critical of its coverage of medicines. But the study also has important implications for health professionals who deal with the media. Are they framing information in a balanced way or colluding with the media to achieve maximum impact? Are they disclosing potential conflicts of interest?

One of the study's authors, Professor David Henry, professor of clinical pharmacology at the University of Newcastle, says such questions are becoming more important at a time of ever-closer ties between researchers and industry.

Henry is involved in planning a trial to determine whether giving media outlets feedback about the technical content of stories will result in better coverage of medicines. Outlets will also be told how their performance compares with rivals.

"Generally the media's performance anxiety depends on sales and ratings," says Henry. "Here we would like to have their performance anxiety relate to the quality of their product."

At a broader level, Moynihan argues that doctors should do more to disclose conflicts of interests to patients, and that journalists should also be more forthcoming. He notes that some health journalists also do paid work for outside interests, including pharmaceutical companies.

This is a particularly tricky issue for freelancers like myself. At various times, I have done writing work for the National Health and Medical Research Council, the National Heart Foundation, and other health bodies. It is not always easy to know when to make such declarations. Should I, for instance, declare in this story that I have enjoyed the odd lunch with Moynihan...