June 7, 2002

Dear Editor:

I have been working in the field of bioethics for fifteen years and, until recently, was Deputy Director of the Hastings Center. Like many in our field, I have become increasingly concerned about conflicts of interest resulting from the commercialization of medicine and science, industry-sponsored scientific research, and private-sector bioethics consultation. These concerns have prompted me to take on a new role as Director of the Integrity in Science project at the Center for Science in the Public Interest. (See www.integrityinscience.org)

As you know, in the last decade heightened sensitivity to conflicts of interest, particularly in biomedical research, has led major scientific and clinical journals to strengthen their conflict-of-interest policies and procedures. In addition to disclosing the source of funding that supports a published study, many journals, including the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, the *British Medical Journal*, and the *New England Journal of Medicine*, disclose information about authors’ stock holdings, consultancies, and other relationships that could potentially influence the intellectual content of a published piece. Declaration of that information in the publication is gradually becoming the norm.

As bioethics has become a more established discipline contributing to the public discourse about the responsible conduct of science and use of technology, bioethicists are increasingly engaged in consulting and advisory arrangements with biotechnology, pharmaceutical, chemical, and other companies. Bioethicists serve on advisory boards to those companies, they conduct research under the auspices of industry trade associations, and they receive honoraria for speaking at industry-sponsored events.
Bioethicists and others outside the field have begun to take note of the ways in which a bioethicist’s industry affiliations may create potentially biasing conflicts of interest. Members of the field have recently proposed guidelines governing private-sector bioethics consultation, and bioethics centers have begun to articulate conflict-of-interest policies around external funding. In general, however, bioethics is behind the curve on these issues. Bioethics centers often do not disclose their funding sources in a way that is accessible to the public and bioethicists do not routinely disclose conflicts of interest or commitment when they speak at conferences or to the press. In our survey of 53 bioethics journals, we found that only two have published disclosure requirements or conflict of interest policies.

In February, 2002, the Center for Science in the Public Interest joined with 31 scientists and others to urge science journals to strengthen their policies on conflict of interest and disclosure. (See Van Kolschooten, F. “Can you believe what you read?” Nature 2002;416:360-3, enclosed). I am writing to you in your capacity as editor of a bioethics journal to encourage you to develop a strong policy for your publication.

We urge your journal to adopt a policy whose presumption is that all relevant financial and other significant relationships, as well as authorial information appear in the publication alongside the article, review, study, editorial, or letter. Accordingly, such a policy would require that contributors submit the following information to the journal:

1. Sources of funding for the article, review, study, or other item being published.

2. Financial or other significant relationships (e.g., consulting, speaker fees, corporate advisory committee memberships, expert legal testimony) of the author and the author’s immediate family in the last 5 years with companies, trade associations, unions, litigants, or groups that may gain or lose financially from the results or conclusions in the article, review, study, editorial, or letter.

3. Where applicable, the specific contribution of each author of the published piece (including, where relevant, conception and design; analysis and interpretation of data; drafting of the article; critical revision of the article for intellectual contents; final approval of the article; statistical expertise; administrative, technical or logistical support; and collection and assembly of data).

Financial or other significant relationships with corporate and other clients may inappropriately bias a bioethicist’s work. Disclosure, of course, will not eliminate bias but reflects
the importance of transparency in enabling readers to consider an author’s conclusions or contentions in the light of that additional information. That said, a strong disclosure policy should be understood as only part of the editorial oversight of conflicts of interest. Journals should also establish and enforce a policy that certain conflicts will be disallowed if they are determined to compromise a manuscript’s objectivity.

Bioethicists have played an important role in calling attention to the ways in which gift-giving and financial inducements can compromise the judgment and professional obligations of clinicians and researchers. By instituting policies that identify and address potentially compromising conflicts of interest in bioethics, bioethics journals have the opportunity to promote comparable norms in our own discipline. I urge you to adopt such a policy for your journal and to encourage your editorial colleagues to speak with one voice on these matters.

I appreciate your consideration of this matter and look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Virginia A. Sharpe, Ph.D.

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