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SYMPOSIUM

INVITED PAPER: Customer and consumer confidence in the livestock industry—Professional ethics[1]

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ABSTRACT

Close relationships between university scientists and research sponsors or other commercial interests increase the probability that research bias or conflict of interest (COI) will arise in the research process. University researchers can limit the chances that obvious or subtle forms of bias or COI will occur by (1) carefully managing relationships with sponsors and external parties; (2) using research practices that ensure unbiased management of data and publications; and (3) appreciating that bias and COI also occur when researchers begin to assume roles as experts in both public and sponsored venues. Specific good management practices to avoid COI or bias include (1) following institutional polices; (2) frequent self-evaluation; (3) seeking independent program assessment; and (4) reporting potential COI in publications. Drawing on examples from sales and marketing of specialized feed technologies, areas where the industry should increase its focus on training and mentoring to minimize opportunities for ethical conflicts include (1) emphasizing the importance of the quality and relevance of supporting data used for promoting product sales; (2) strengthening supplier training on products and technologies in the context of fair and ethical positioning, so that opportunities for both ethical lapses and misunderstandings are decreased; (3) reinforcing the importance of confidentiality in maintaining customer trust in suppliers; and (4) increasing recognition of COI as it can occur between consultants and their clients for recommendations of technologies in which the consultant has undisclosed financial interest.

Key words: bias, business ethics, client confidentiality, conflict of interest, industry-sponsored research

INTRODUCTION

"Ethics" has been defined as "a set of moral principles; a system of moral values; a theory or system of moral values; the principles of conduct governing an individual or a group (professional ethics); a guiding philosophy; a consciousness of moral importance" (Merriam-Webster.com, 2015). "Professional ethics" refers to the application of guiding philosophies or ethical codes by learned professionals within the confines of an industry or activity that has generally well-described stakeholders. Within a given area of endeavor, practices that are considered ethical are generally synonymous with those understood to be fair in outcome to all parties that either are or could have been affected by that practice. The livestock industry has been long regarded as having high ethical standards; however, there is a growing sentiment among industry professionals and producers alike that the occurrence of unethical behavior in business and in the sciences might be on the rise. If true, it could be argued that this trend is a mere reflection of the decline of ethical mores within American society as a whole. Nonetheless, it could be argued that the sheer complexity of modern animal agriculture contributes to the opportunity for both real and perceived ethical conflicts to occur. Agricultural supply chains have become very complex, with management and operations located and coordinated both domestically and internationally. In agricultural sales organizations, management structures have become increasingly flat at the same time that sales territories have become increas-

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ingly large, leading to less opportunity for training and mentoring of developing colleagues than has occurred in the past. This business condition creates a rich environment for errors and misunderstandings, if not for outright ethical lapses. At the level of livestock research and commercial product development, business and university research concerns have become increasingly intertwined. Not only does a great deal of university research target commercial endpoints, but researchers often depend significantly on industry investment to support their research objectives. Although this interaction likely has a synergistic effect on overall development of livestock technologies, it also requires greater vigilance relative to bias and potential conflict of interest among university researchers.

This paper will focus on some common ethical conflicts encountered in university research and in conducting business in the livestock sector where sales of feed technologies will be used as an example. The importance of ethical standards and awareness along with the need for training and mentoring of colleagues and peers will also be discussed.

University Perspective: Managing Conflict of Interest and Bias in Research

Proper Relationships with Sponsors and External Parties. Ethical issues facing university scientists most often involve issues of bias (prejudice or slanted outlook) and conflict of interest (**COI**; "a conflict between the private interests and the official responsibilities of a person in a position of trust"; http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/). These issues are a practical concern on university campuses because problems with bias and COI affect public perception of research findings. Associations between support for research (or financial linkages between scientists and sponsoring companies) by the pharmaceutical industry and outcomes of controlled clinical studies in human medicine (e.g., Davidson, 1986) have been extensively documented in the literature. The ultimate effects of such associations are tarnished reputations of scientists and the institutions they work for, and perhaps more important, diminished public trust in research findings.

Because of the serious negative consequences of bias and COI issues, virtually all public universities have policies in place to define, assess, and report COI among research-active faculty members who oversee funded research projects. Faculty committees that review and recommend remediation of potential COI are a common feature of university procedures. Primary concerns include COI associated with financial, professional, and personal relationships. Financial limits vary somewhat among institutions, but an aggregate interest of somewhere in the range of $1,000 to $5,000 is a typical threshold for disclosure. Consulting fees or similar sources of income associated with potential research sponsors usually are also considered. Once the aggregate threshold is met, faculty members are generally required to list and describe potential COI and subsequently inform members of their research team of the identified financial interests, consultancies, and any other potential issues that might influence their objectivity in conducting research. Suggested guidelines for COI policies are widely available, one example being those recommended by the Association of American Universities (www.aau.edu/policy/COI_policies.aspx?id=10096).

Animal science researchers, particularly those working with industry-sponsored research, are under increasing scrutiny with respect to bias and COI. In addition to COI that require reporting, issues that fall below official reporting guidelines can also constitute potential concerns, falling into the category of "subtle COI." For example, subtle COI and bias might occur as a result of associations that a faculty member has with companies providing discretionary funding and products to support research activities, regular consultancies that fall below reporting limits, honoraria for service on advisory boards or for technical presentations to clients groups, as well all-expenses-paid trips to company-sponsored activities of various types. Subtle COI are certainly not limited to commercial companies, as connections to commodity organizations or even professional societies that have public stands on issues related to the faculty member's research could become problems. To avoid documentable and subtle COI, animal scientists must take care to (1) follow all institutional polices; (2) practice thoughtful and frequent self-evaluation (not necessarily a natural process for everyone, but potentially a learned behavior); (3) seek assessment by trusted peers or other independent sources of evaluation; and (4) report potential COI in all publications, regardless of the policy of the publisher. A good general rule of thumb to follow is that "if you think something might be a COI, it probably is."

Unbiased Management of Data and Publications. Conflicts of interest and bias also can be demonstrated in how scientists handle and report data. Practical concerns include (1) failing to report data that might reflect negatively on a sponsor's product, a particular treatment, or the investigator's hypothesis; (2) understating the negative effects of a treatment; (3) overstating the positive effects of a treatment; (4) designing studies to avoid comparisons that might reflect unfavorably on a treatment or hypothesis (e.g., lack of proper controls or eliminating potentially superior treatments); and (5) altering data to arbitrarily eliminate observations that might reflect negatively on a hypothesis or a particular treatment (e.g., deletion of outliers).

Animal scientists should avoid the trap of not reporting negative data in which there is no apparent difference between key treatment comparisons. If in doubt about the validity of study results, the study should be repeated, ensuring adequate design and power, and in a manner that might allow pooling of data with previous studies. In the long view, no-response data sets have scientific merit, because