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SPECIAL ARTICLE

The cohabitation of academia and industry: What position do the medical journals take regarding opinion articles? ☆

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Abstract Should medical journals publish editorials and educational articles written by authors who have financial conflicts of interest with pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries on whose products (or their competitors) they discuss? In the last 18 months, a controversy was sparked between *The New England Journal of Medicine* and *BMJ*, who took 2 opposite positions: the former stated that the negative bias against authors with conflicts of interest with industry is excessive and therefore accept articles from any expert, ensuring that they have the minimum possible bias. *BMJ*, in contrast, prohibits the publication of these types of article by authors who have financial conflicts of interest with industry. This article discusses the approaches of the 2 journals (and those of others) and reflects on this type of conflict in the medical profession.
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La cohabitación de la academia y la industria: ¿qué postura toman las revistas médicas en relación con los artículos de opinión?

Resumen ¿Deben las revistas médicas publicar editoriales y artículos de carácter educativo escritos por autores que presentan conflictos de intereses financieros con las industrias farmacéutica y biotecnológica de cuyos productos (o sus competidores) opinan? En los últimos 18 meses se ha desatado una polémica entre *The New England Journal of Medicine* y *BMJ*, que plantean 2 posturas opuestas: la primera entiende que el prejuicio negativo contra autores con

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conflicto de intereses con la industria es excesivo y, por tanto, acepta artículos de cualquier experto procurando que presenten el mínimo sesgo posible. *BMJ*, por el contrario, prohíbe publicar ese tipo de artículos por autores que tienen conflicto de intereses financieros con la industria. En este artículo se desarrollan las actitudes de ambas (y otras) revistas y se reflexiona sobre este tipo de conflicto en la profesión médica.

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In the last 18 months, a controversy has emerged between 2 of the most prestigious journals of medicine regarding publishing opinion articles signed by authors who have conflicts of interest (Col) (Table 1) with the biopharmaceutical industry related to the article in question. Accepting the general principle that authors should declare their Col (actual or those that might be perceived) both to the journal directors and readers, the question lies in whether this is sufficient when attempting to offer an opinion. Not being able to publically access the results of particular clinical trials impedes physicians from considering them in their standard practice. This fact led to the announcement, at the end of 2014, by the British Medical Journal (BMJ) that they would not publish educational articles (for example, comments and reviews) or editorials signed by authors with financial Col with the industry.^{1,2} Shortly afterwards, in May 2015, the New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) published an editorial³ and a series of articles⁴⁻⁶ in which it declared that collaboration between the industry and academia was necessary to advance the knowledge of diseases and their treatment. The NEJM attempted to contextualize (in short, minimize) the impor-

tance of the biases that industry relationship exerts on the medical profession. In the NEJM's view, the prejudice against the industry is exaggerated, and the biases in the professional judgment of physicians can have numerous other causes. The need for collaboration between academia and industry is clear, both for clinical research (in which innovative approaches are being planned^{8,9}) and preclinical research (in which hundreds of agreements are produced each year¹⁰). The issue is what position should a medical journal take when publishing opinion articles, in which the authors *interpret* the data from clinical trials and other types of studies.

New England Journal of Medicine and the Biomedical Industry

The NEJM attitude is noteworthy because it was the first journal to require that authors declare their financial agreements with the industry,¹¹ so as to subsequently prohibit the publishing of editorials or reviews written by authors with financial Col with the companies that owned the drug products the authors are commenting on in the articles.¹² However, this attitude is not so striking if we consider 2 facts. In 2002, the NEJM with its current director relaxed the demands so that the above mentioned prohibition only affected authors with "significant financial interests" in a company (or its competitors).¹³ Since then, experts have been selected with the maximum authority and the "minimum bias possible",¹⁴ whatever that means.

The second noteworthy fact is that among the most prestigious journals of general medicine, NEJM publishes the most trials sponsored by biomedical companies. Thus, in the first semester of 2014, NEJM published 55 trials, of which 49% were industry-sponsored. These figures for The Lancet and JAMA, meanwhile, were 38 trials and 32%, and 30 trials and 10%, respectively. BMJ only published 13 clinical trials, none of which were sponsored by the industry.¹⁵

It is known that among the most prestigious journals, those that publish more industry-sponsored trials obtained a larger number of citations (which helps gain a high impact factor) and reprints (which results in an improvement in the income statements).¹⁶ Additionally, the publication of clinical trials related to the approval of a new drug product or a new indication is accompanied by a significant increase in the number of citations during the first year of the article's publication. Of the 16 articles with these characteristics published in the 3 major journals of general medicine during the first half of 2014, NEJM published 14, The Lancet published 2 and JAMA published none.¹⁷ These data

Table 1 Conflicts of Interest. Definition and interpretation.

Definition

Set of circumstances that result in the risk that the professional judgment or activities regarding a primary interest are unduly influenced by a secondary interest

Interpretation

The *primary interest* that requires protection depends on the purpose of the individual's professional activity.

Thus, the primary interests can include promoting and protecting the integrity of the research, the wellbeing of the patients or the quality of the medical education. Physicians and medical researchers accept the primacy of these interests when performing their professional activity.

The *secondary interests* include financial benefits, the desire to progress in a professional career, recognition for personal achievements, and favors to friends, family, students and colleagues.

The policies on conflicts of interest are focused on the financial type, not because these are necessarily the most corrupting but because they are relatively more objective and quantifiable.

Source: The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine.⁷

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