SCOPING THE EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM OF CONFLICT-OF-INTEREST AND MONEYED INFLUENCE IN PUBLIC HEALTH

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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE. THE COMMON GOOD: THE ROLE OF INTEGRITY IN THE SUPPORT OF LIFE AND HUMAN SECURITY. JULY 4 – 8, 2016 MUNICH, GERMANY

SUB-THEME: “GOVERNANCE AND THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS”
INTERNATIONAL
JOINT POLICY COMMITTEE
OF THE SOCIETIES OF EPIDEMIOLOGY

Health for all through ethical, independent and transparent science

WORKING AT THE NEXUS OF RESEARCH AND POLICY

VISION STATEMENT

We strive to bring clarity to the science of epidemiology, paving the way to rational evidence-based policy. We work to promote and protect public health by serving as an ethical and effective counterweight to the misuse of epidemiologic evidence.
Today’s topic addresses specific concerns pertaining to

Conflict-of-Interest and Disclosure
as these pertain to knowledge transfer / the translation of science into policy

AKA conflicts of interest / conflict of interests / conflicting interests / COI
DEFINITION

“COI exists when there is a divergence between an individual’s private interests [competing interests] and his/her responsibilities to scientific and publishing activities such that a reasonable observer might wonder if the individual’s behaviour or judgment was motivated by consideration of his/her competing interests”

Source: World Association of Medical Editors
3.2 Avoiding Conflicting Interests

3.2.1 Avoiding Conflicting Interests: A conflict of interests occurs whenever a political, bureaucratic, career, or economic incentive, real or perceived, has the potential for producing partiality or compromising objectivity ...

3.2.2 Full Disclosure: Environmental epidemiology researchers, IRB/REB members, journal reviewers and editors, research grant reviewers, and other professionals who have a decision-making or primary role in the funding, conduct, or publication of research should provide full disclosure of financial and/or other advisory relationships that could influence their decision-making ...

3.2.3 Guidelines Governing Disclosure: Institutions, funding agencies, regulatory agencies, journals and other organisations that control the conduct, publication, or implementation of environmental epidemiology research should support the goal of transparency by establishing guidelines governing disclosure of relationships that may underlie all types of conflicting interests.
THE BOTTOM LINE ...  

A conflict exists whenever an epidemiologist’s role, obligation, or personal interest in accommodating an institution, sponsor, job/financial security, or personal goals compromises obligations to others who have a right to expect objectivity and fairness.

Such circumstances are to be scrupulously avoided in conducting environmental epidemiology investigations because the attendant negative health consequences in environmental epidemiology research can be great.
COI CAN ARISE IN EVERY AVENUE OF OUR ENDEAVOUR

• Serving as a peer reviewer
• Publishing
• Receiving financial support
• Election to office and having a vote
• Serving on boards and on review / editorial / advisory panels
• Interpreting the evidence before us
• Receiving donations (from vested interests?)
• And so on …
WATCH WORDS FOR US IF WE ARE TO BE ETHICAL IN OUR CONDUCT AS PROFESSIONALS

A MINEFIELD OF REAL VS. PERCEIVED COIs

AND OF

DISCLOSURE AND RECUSAL
DAMAGE CAUSED FROM FAILURES TO DISCLOSE OR RECUSE

PERSONAL

• Loss of credibility
• Loss of job
• Banned from publishing or receiving funds for a specified time
• Others ...

PUBLIC

• Infiltration of advisory/expert boards/panels, and the literature with bias and junk science
• Others ...
A Case Study
CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY DEMONSTRATES IMPROPER INFLUENCE OF ASBESTOS INDUSTRY (EXAMPLE THANKS TO KATHLEEN RUFF)

• Concordia University is one of two major English-speaking universities in Quebec, Canada (the other being McGill)

• In 2010 a consortium of investors sought a $58 million loan from the Quebec government to re-open a Quebec asbestos mine and export vast amounts of asbestos to developing countries

• The leader of the consortium, Baljit Chadha, and his wife, Roshi Chadha (both presidents of companies exporting asbestos from Quebec) sat on the Board of Governors of Concordia (and McGill) universities

• Baljit Chadha made significant financial donations to Concordia's John Molson School of Business, was named Governor Emeritus, and had an auditorium named in his honour

• A lecturer at Concordia's School of Business, John Aylen, was hired as a public relations consultant by Chadha to promote Chadha's asbestos project
CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY PUBLISHES A REPORT SUPPORTING THE ASBESTOS TRADE

• The Quebec Medical Association, all Quebec's Directors of Public Health, and the scientific community strongly opposed Chadha's project

• In 2014 Concordia University commissioned, funded, published and praised a report which eulogized Chadha (a Governor Emeritus and major donor to the university) and eulogized his project to export asbestos

• The report stated that the scientific evidence supports use of chrysotile asbestos and those who opposed the project acted irrationally, unethically and emotionally

• The report was written by John Aylen. There was no disclosure that he had been hired by Chadha as a consultant to promote the asbestos mine

• There was no disclosure that Chadha was a Governor Emeritus and major donor to Concordia University
A complaint was submitted to Concordia University challenging the Report's scientific misinformation, industry influence, and undisclosed Conflict-of-Interest.

Concordia was asked to retract the Report, which contributes to public harm, and carry out an independent, transparent investigation as to how such serious violations of academic integrity had occurred.

Concordia refused to do so.

Instead, Concordia carried out a secretive, internal pretense of an “investigation” whereby Concordia's School of Business “investigated” itself.
A case of

“The Fox Guarding the Henhouse” ...
CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY'S SECRET “INVESTIGATION” CONDONED THE WRONGDOING

- No information about the supposed “investigation” or its report was made public
- No action was taken, apart from a vague, facile statement that Concordia had addressed the conflict-of-interest issue. No details were provided
- The report was not retracted
- Instead, Concordia extolled its publication of harmful scientific misinformation as being “the essence of academic freedom”
ACADEMIA IS A MULTI-BILLION INDUSTRY THAT FAILS TO ADEQUATELY ADDRESS CONFLICTING INTERESTS

• At the end of the day, ethics are key to science and to public health

• Without a serious, effective system of ethical oversight, evidence and public policy are being easily corrupted by vested interests

• Overwhelming evidence of this has been provided by: the tobacco industry, the asbestos industry, the fossil fuel industry, the chemical industry, the fast food industry, the mining industry, the sweetened beverage industry, the lead industry; the list is endless
THE IJPC-SE APPROACH: TRANSPARENCY THROUGH DISCLOSURE AND RECUSAL
Name in full: (First, middle initial, last): JOHN DOE
Current occupation, if employed; or, “retired”: RESEARCHER

If currently employed:
Name of primary employing entity: HEALTH ADMINISTRATION
Name of secondary employing entity, if applicable: -

Whether currently employed or not:
Primary professional affiliation taking up most of your volunteer time: SOCIETY X
Secondary such affiliation, if applicable: N/A

OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, OR OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS OF EMPLOYMENT IF NOW RETIRED:
Primary professional employment focus: PUBLIC HEALTH
Secondary professional employment focus, if applicable: MEDICINE
Tertiary professional employment focus, if applicable: NONE

I represent the following organization on the IJPC-SE (acronym, or “none”): SOCIETY X as the Primary (1), Secondary (2), Tertiary (3) or Quaternary (4), or not applicable [N/A] PRIMARY representative; or, as an invited guest/interested party/expert advisor:
Please include below, and elaborate where needed, all actual conflicting interests, including financial, consultant, institutional and other relationships that might lead or has led to bias or a conflict-of-interest, or that reasonably might create a perception of bias or a conflict-of-interest by your peers or the public. If there are none, please state “None” alongside each item “a” through “e” below. If in doubt, rather err on the side of providing more information as this will minimize the need for follow-up.

With the above definitions in mind relating to my employer and/or volunteer entities, those entities from which I have accepted grants / contracts, salaries / stipends / honoraria / royalties, both monetarily and in-kind, and anything else like personal relationships that could actually introduce, or be perceived to introduce bias into my decision-making, I disclose the following information covering the 5-year period since January 1, 2011:
IJPCE-SE CONFLICT-OF-INTEREST (COI) DISCLOSURE STATEMENT  INTERIM FORM: 3 OF 3

a) Financial relationships: PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY
b) Consultant relationships: NONE
c) Institutional relationships: NONE
d) Other relationships: NONE
e) Any additional information: NONE

If in my service to the IJPCE-SE I should ever find myself in a conflict-of-interest, actual or perceived, I will declare it and offer to recuse myself from all circumstances that could in any way influence Board deliberations as per the Founding Bylaws (Article V, Section 2).

Please type your signature here: JOHN DOE

Enter Today’s date (month/day/year) here: 01/24/2016
A CURRENT IJPC-SE CONUNDRUM: A REAL OR A PERCEIVED COI?

A plaintiff law firm that:

(1) works exclusively in asbestos tort litigation in support of individuals allegedly harmed by exposure to asbestos, and

(2) likely made good use of the IJPC-SE 2012 Position Statement on Asbestos in its case against defense (corporate) attorneys

has pledged to donate $20,000 to the IJPC-SE.

Should the IJPC-SE accept the donation?

If “yes”, is there any risk of the IJPC-SE’s credibility being sullied in the future in claims of being beholden to plaintiff law firms?
PROPOSED PROTECTION BY POSTING ON WEBSITE AND ON ACKNOWLEDGMENT RECEIPTS

Whether a donation is made on behalf of an individual, a family, a firm, a business, a corporation, or a philanthropic foundation, the IJPC-SE accepts it on the understanding that the donation is made:

• in good faith in support of the IJPC-SE’s Mission (linked to www.ijpc-se.org);

• consistent with the IJPC-SE’s Gift Acceptance Policy (linked to https://www.ijpc-se.org/documents/IJPC-SE_Financial_Contribution_Policy-June_8_2015_revision_approved_June_26_revised_Sep_16_2015.pdf); and

• without the expectation of any quid pro quo.

No donation can be accepted from an individual, a business entity or other organization if the IJPC-SE is currently working, or is planning to work, on any topic whose final product could be of direct or indirect financial relevance to the business interests of such individual, business entity or organization.
Vested interests, who do not wish independent, objective scientific evidence to be put forward when it threatens their interests, are likely to use any tactic possible to attack and slur the IJPC-SE.

The asbestos industry, in particular, has already and will likely continue to seek to attack and slur the IJPC-SE because the IJPC-SE 2012 Position Statement on Asbestos puts forward independent, objective scientific evidence that threatens their interests.

The IJPC-SE has therefore to be aware that such attacks unfortunately are likely, but should not to let this fact control the IJPC-SE's policies.

The test for whether COI or improper influence exists is whether, in the view of an objective, rational person, a real or perceived COI or improper influence exists. The test is not whether industries with a vested interest at stake allege that COI or improper influence exists. This would allow vested interests to control and/or impede any efforts to carry out independent, objective scientific work that serves the public interest but may threaten such vested interests.
TRANSPARENCY IN IJPC-SE DONOR POLICY (2 OF 2)

• If, in the view of an objective, rational person, a real or perceived COI or improper influence exists with regard to a donation, the IJPC-SE should refuse the donation. Whether the donation comes from an individual, a business or any other entity, the same standard would apply.

• If the IJPC-SE is currently working, or is planning to work on any topic whose final product could be of direct or indirect relevance to the financial interests of an individual, a business entity or other organisation, a donation from the individual, business entity or organisation should not be accepted. This decision is recommended in order to avoid any real or perceived influence in the final outcome of the work product of the IJPC-SE. If it is learned after a donation has been accepted that a real or perceived influence of this nature exists, the donation would be returned.

• The fact that the IJPC-SE has adopted and published Position Statements on particular topics does not create a real or perceived COI or improper influence with regard to such topics because the work has been completed and finalized.
THE IJPC-SE BOARD’S CURRENT CONUNDRUM

Does a policy such as the one outlined above allow acceptance of an expected $20,000 from a law firm that has pledged to make such a donation?

• To accept or not to accept the pledged donation?

NOTE THAT WITHOUT FUNDING, the work of the IJPC-SE would be severely curtailed; this at a time when the David’s (the public interest professions) vs. the Goliath’s (powerful moneyed interests) are so at odds with one another.
QUESTIONS OF CLARIFICATION?

WWW.COLINSOSKOLNE.COM (ARCHIVE PPT)

WWW.IJPC-SE.ORG

EPIDEMIOLOGY CONGRESS, JUNE 21-24, 2016 - MIAMI
HTTPS://WWW.IJPC-SE.ORG/?P=PRESENTATIONS#COIAD