

## On institutional conflicts of interests

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Most institutional conflict of interest policies deal with individual trust and responsibility to the organization but ignore possible problems that may arise in organizational partnerships, which Krimsky termed the *“inevitable tide of corporate and academic partnerships and the commercialism of knowledge”* (Message #978). Safeguards to address this problem are needed in order to prevent academic/corporate partnerships unduly influencing the representation and interpretation of research.

This question was explored by Harold Barnes in his book: *“Social Institutions – In an Era of World Upheaval”* (1942). According to Barnes, institutional conflicts of interests can have a far greater impact on an organization than individual conflicts of interests as they set an expected level of behaviour (establish an institutional culture) for all members of the organization. Barnes found that this can affect the actions of dozens or even thousands of individuals, both within, and outside an organization. In relation to universities he found that:

*“Faculty members depend heavily on the institution’s administration for their salaries, promotions, tenure, space, teaching assignments, annual increases, and committee assignments. This power relationship makes it extremely hard for faculty members to be truly independent and objective toward the demands or perceived demands of the institution. This imbalance of influence provides an avalanche of pressure for expediency, conformity [and] intellectual lethargy”.*

This situation was also addressed by the statement published on conflict of interest in 2006 by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (quoted in part):

*“Conflict of interest exists when an author (or the author’s institution), reviewer, or editor has financial or personal relationships that inappropriately influence (bias) his or her actions (such relationships are also known as dual commitments, competing interests, or competing loyalties). These relationships vary from those with negligible potential to those with great potential to influence judgment, and not all relationships represent true conflict of interest. The potential for conflict of interest can exist whether or not an individual believes that the relationship affects his or her scientific judgment. Financial relationships (such as employment, consultancies, stock ownership, honoraria, paid expert testimony) are the most easily identifiable conflicts of interest and the most likely to undermine the credibility of the journal, the authors, and of science itself.”*

The problems of conflict of interest in science was the central issue in a national conference titled *“Conflicted Science”* in July 2003, and sponsored by the Centre for Science in Public Interest (CPSI) in the USA. The conference examined how the increasing commercialization of science was undermining science itself.

At the conference, journalists, researchers and university professors from a wide range of fields, from environmental planning to paediatrics to criminal justice, recounted how the commercializing of science was stifling or corrupting their disciplines. The conference concluded that there was a significant societal loss of trust in 'science', even when it came from what appeared to be independent sources. Non-profit organizations, public universities, and health charities, - all too often dependent on corporate money, have become the messengers for corporate interests. Investigations by the CSPI has shown that *"[t]here is strong evidence that researchers' financial ties to chemical, pharmaceutical, or tobacco manufacturers directly influence their published positions in supporting the benefit or downplaying the harm of the manufacturer's product"*.

Unfortunately in Australia the problem of institutional conflicts of interests and its impact on scientific research and the evaluation of that research for standard setting has not received the attention it so richly deserves.

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<http://www.emfacts.com/weblog/?p=996>