

Should medical journals publish sponsored content?

Some journals take funding from drug companies or other organisations to publish articles.

Jadwiga A Wedzicha says this enables niche work to be disseminated, advancing medicine, but **Robert Steinbrook** and **Jerome P Kassirer** believe that sponsorship introduces more conflicts of interest and erodes trust



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● Head to head: Should journals stop publishing research funded by the drug industry?

(*BMJ* 2014;348:g171)

● Analysis: Data availability for industry sponsored trials: what should medical journals require?

(*BMJ* 2010;341:c5391)

Jadwiga A Wedzicha professor of respiratory medicine, University College London, Royal Free Campus, London NW3 2PF w.wedzicha@ucl.ac.uk

YES Dissemination of medical knowledge is essential to wide groups of healthcare professionals, whether they are practising clinicians or researchers. The medical literature contributes in several ways, including editorials, clinical reviews, original papers, and letters to the editor. Introduction of more open access publishing has also improved global dissemination of clinical and research papers.

In addition to original articles and reviews, some journals publish individual or collections of articles that have been sponsored by an agency other than the journal's publisher. The sponsorship is usually from the pharmaceutical industry but can also be from other organisations such as specialist societies, charities, or government agencies. The sponsorship usually covers the costs of producing and disseminating the publication, with some profit remaining for the journal. Without such sponsorship much of this material would not be widely published, and I therefore believe that it benefits medical knowledge.

Robert Steinbrook professor adjunct of internal medicine, Department of Internal Medicine, Yale School of Medicine, 333 Cedar St, I-456 SHM, PO Box 208008, New Haven, CT 06520Q, USA
robert.steinbrook@yale.edu
Jerome P Kassirer distinguished professor, Tufts University School of Medicine, Boston, MA, USA

NO To increase profit, the owners of medical journals may encourage editors to add lucrative sponsored content. Until recently, journals thrived by funding their operations through subscription and commercial advertising fees, and the costs of editors and reviewers were often met by academic institutions. However, free access to journal articles and textbooks online has turned many subscribers and advertisers away, jeopardising medical publishing.

Filling the gap with readily available commercial content is a seductive but hazardous approach. Such content creates new conflicts of interest and makes bias more likely. Publishing sponsored content can cheapen a journal's hard earned reputation, devalue readers' trust, and compromise the integrity of the editors. Physicians and patients rely on medical journals for trusted information that can improve care, not to purvey commercial content.

The financial challenges for medical journals in the digital age are similar to those for newspapers, magazines, and the music business.^{2 3} Even the *New York Times*, which is known for its high journalistic standards, has native advertising content.

Added value

Sponsored articles should not be published within the pages of a general or specialist journal. Instead, they are now mostly published in a sponsored supplement separate from the main journal.

The supplements are usually collections of review articles generated after discussions at a meeting or a workshop. However, they may be also collections of articles that increase awareness of a disease or describe unmet needs in research. A good example is a recent collection of articles in the *European Respiratory Review* published by the European Respiratory Society on topics from the fifth international congress on pulmonary rare diseases and orphan drugs that was sponsored by the Scleroderma World Foundation. This is an up to date and educational collection of papers that highlight the burden of disease, but they would not necessarily have been commissioned by editors for the main society journal. Sponsored publication has made the information easily accessible to a wide spectrum of readers.

Discussions at scientific and medical meetings can be recorded and may be of educational importance to a wider audience. Workshops

Reader confusion

The problem is not reports of research that is sponsored by industry and conducted appropriately—that is, research conducted independently of the sponsor and without the sponsor's say in the final product.⁴ The problem is sponsored content that can be confused with editorial content.^{2 5} For years, some journals have published supplements as separate issues or as part of a regular issue, with funding from commercial or other sources. Supplements piggyback on a journal's reputation. It is well known, however, that the sources of funding for supplements can bias their content because of preferential treatment for certain topics and points of view. The publication of sponsored content would only make such problems worse.

Readers have little or no difficulty distinguishing traditional advertisements from editorial content. Not so, however, with sponsored content. Sponsored content, including that produced by a company for its commercial value, can look the same as other content. It can take the form of articles, images, or videos. The sponsor may not only control the content but these “native adverts” may mimic the look of other editorial content. Native adverts may even be shared, liked, and commented on.⁶

The potential for sponsored content to masquerade as journal editorial content is evident. One estimate, from the United States, is that marketers spent \$1.9bn (£1.2bn; €1.4bn) on

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on new therapies, disease mechanisms, or outcome measures may generate new ideas and hypotheses that can be discussed in the articles and then taken forward by researchers.

Safeguards

There is obvious concern that sponsored material may be just an advertisement for a company's products. However, safeguards can be put into place by the editorial team to ensure that the process is as transparent as possible and all conflicts of interest are clearly stated. Because funding sources can bias the content of supplements through the choice of topics and viewpoints, the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) has produced specific and helpful guidelines that cover sponsored material. Among the ICMJE recommendations are statements that the editor of the journal should appoint a specific supplement editor who is totally independent

of the sponsor. Ideally, the editor should discuss the content of the sponsored articles before the meeting or symposium takes place and have some influence on the choice of authors. All articles must be written by the named authors and a formal declaration of authorship should be provided, together with full standard declaration of conflicts of interest. All sponsored material must be peer reviewed, and the editor should have the right to reject any articles that do not meet the standard of the journal or are considered biased in favour of the sponsor.¹

One important issue is that the use of sponsorship to publish articles may erode the readers' trust in editors and ultimately journals. This is why a clear and transparent editorial process with a careful peer review process is essential to maintain the quality of the supplement and match the editorial standards of the main journal.

Importantly, any sponsored content should be easily distinguished from the usual content of the journal. Ideally the articles should be in a separate supplement or even in a journal with a different title to clearly distinguish the content. No regular journal content such as original papers should be published in this supplement.

The process followed for supplements should be similar regardless of the sponsor. Finally, journals should disclose to the readers the amount of sponsorship that is received for the supplement.

Excluding industry is unrealistic

Development of novel medical interventions requires the cooperation of clinical academics, scientists, and industry, and this is reflected in several recent academia-industry partnerships in the UK—for example, the collaboration between the Medical Research Council and the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry on chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. The success of these partnerships requires considerable interaction and dialogue, and meetings and workshops are important stages in the development of research programmes. A permanent record of these discussions and outcomes is important to other researchers in the field, thus widening the scope of prospective collaborations. Thus I support the publication of sponsored articles as long as the journal follows a robust process, the content is not biased, and readers can easily identify the articles as sponsored.

commercial content in the news media in 2013 and that spending will increase.³ The most likely sources of sponsored content are companies that make drugs, medical devices, or other medical products. But other types of companies may also sponsor content, as well as management or consulting firms, non-profit organisations, and foundations. Although journals could try to identify a limited group of sponsors that are acceptable, making such distinctions is fraught with peril.

A medical journal's brand is based on its reputation for accuracy, fairness, objectivity, and the quality of the science it publishes. It takes years, or even decades, to build and sustain readers' trust, yet it takes only a false step or lapse to lose it. Authors preferentially send their papers to highly regarded and trusted journals. If sponsored content contains biased information, and it is a reasonable assumption that it would, readers would be misled and the journal's brand would suffer.

Would editors have control over commercial content? Would editors be called on to vet it? How could editors be expected to do so when the content could be about many different topics, from alternative medicines and purportedly healthy foods to drugs and medical devices, or even automobiles or fine wine? What criteria would editors use to decide what is acceptable and what is not? The role of editors would likely vary greatly between journals, and it is easy to imagine that in many instances editors would have no say at all. What would they do then?

If top tier journals allow sponsored content, even in limited instances and with substantial restrictions, their actions may well affect the policies of less influential journals; they may take sponsorship further and permit far more commercial content.

Medical journals already have more than enough problems with financial conflicts of interest for their editorial content.⁷ For example, some journals publish clinical practice guidelines that have been funded by industry, drafted by panels many of whose members have financial associations with industry, and that make recommendations about the use of a sponsor's drugs. But sponsored content could make publication of such problematic guidelines easier. Publication of industry sponsored trials primarily designed for marketing purposes raises similar considerations. The last thing medical journals should want to do is to create new problems by adding commercial content.

Editors cannot avoid being influenced

Confusing the reader, devaluing a journal's brand, and creating new conflicts of interest are all serious risks, but the worst consequence of sponsored content could be its subtle influences on an editor. A major advantage of knowing nothing about the traditional advertisements and other business aspects of a journal is that the editor cannot be swayed in his or her judgment in the selection of editorially vetted material by what is likely to appear on the commercial side. Even if a company

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that sponsors a portal devoted to a specific disease has no influence on the editorial content displayed, an editor's choice of articles can be either favourable or unfavourable to its products. The situation would be no different under a model of sponsorship where the sponsor has no editorial control over sponsored articles, perhaps paying only for printing and distribution in return for the publication of its logo after the content has been commissioned, reviewed, and accepted. When the financial value of a sponsorship is large, the loss of the sponsorship could jeopardise the publication's finances. Because traditional advertisements are not linked to specific content, it is far easier for editors to ignore them and the companies that buy them.

Editors may fool themselves into thinking that they can operate without bias in a world of commercial content, but the sway of financial considerations is insidious.⁸ It would be impossible for a reader to know whether an editor was being affected. For medical journals in particular, carrying sponsored content is a bad idea.

Competing interests: JAW is chair of the European Respiratory Society Publications Committee and oversees its publications, including the journal *European Respiratory Review*, which contains sponsored articles.

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References are in the version on bmj.com.

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