Conflicts of interest and vision research

Two years ago the Trustees of the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology, recognizing that situations could occur that would interfere with the quality and objectivity of visual research, established a Committee on Guidelines for Clinical Investigation. The committee's charge was to determine possible situations that could produce conflicts of interest in clinical research on drugs and devices, to formulate a set of ethical principles to avoid such conflicts of interest, and to recommend mechanisms whereby both the investigator and the public could be protected from conflicts of interest.

At present, members of the committee are Thomas D. Duane, Philadelphia, Pa.; Phillip P. Ellis, Denver, Colo.; Paul Hendkind, Bronx, N. Y.; Herbert E. Kaufman, Editor of Investigative Ophthalmology, Gainesville, Fla.; Irving H. Leopold, representing the Committee on Drugs, of the American Academy of Ophthalmology and Otolaryngology; Albert M. Potts, Chairman of the Trustees of ARVO, Chicago, Ill.; Robert D. Reinecke, Secretary of ARVO, Albany, N. Y.; and Bernard Schwartz, Boston, Mass., Chairman of the Committee.

The committee's basic philosophy was that the onus should be on the investigator to avoid a situation that produces a conflict of interest, thus, obviating as much as possible any "policing" effort.

The committee considered a number of situations where possible conflicts of interest could occur. These range from a direct financial interest of the investigator, or the investigator's family, to an indirect interest by other individuals engaged in the research project, by the institution, or department which may be sponsoring the research.

The committee also considered that there should be no interference with the financial privileges enjoyed by an individual for the rights and rewards for inventions. The committee recognized that there was a limited number of capable investigators in ophthalmology and visual research and

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that new drugs and devices have to be developed. Also, the committee fully realized that an investigator may have a vested interest, such as stocks or bonds, in a company, and still perform competent and adequate research.

The Committee solicited opinions from the ophthalmic and vision research community, as well as from the editors of the American journals in ophthalmic and visual research. The committee also sought guidance from other organizations such as the American Medical Association. The only pertinent guideline for ethical principles was the following statement: "Under no circumstances may the physician place his/her financial interest above the welfare of his/her patients. The prime objective of the medical profession is to render service to humanity; reward or financial gain is a subordinate consideration.*

After considering all these variables, the committee recommended that a policy of open disclosure be adopted for the ARVO.

All sources of support for a research project should be indicated when a paper is submitted for publication to Investigative Ophthalmology and when an abstract is submitted for presentation at the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology meetings, either national or local. Each author should also provide a statement indicating if there is any vested (financial) interest in the investigation.

It was also the committee's opinion that a recommendation be made to the Food and Drug Administration. All investigators involved in testing drugs or devices from the experimental animal to final studies of clinical use should provide open disclosure of vested interests.

These principles have been approved by the Trustees of ARVO.

The committee and Trustees realize that the potential problem of conflict of interest in visual research is a complex one with many ramifications. ARVO recognizes that such a problem can exist and that a firm stand is required to assure that the objectivity of visual research be maintained.


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