

Case 01/14

Refusal to give details of a competing interest

A journal published a paper on passive smoking in which the authors failed to declare financial support from the tobacco industry. A subsequent letter highlighted this failure, and the authors responded in a letter in which they offered some explanation, admitting funding from one source.

The editor then published an editorial in which he detailed the extensive involvement of this group with the tobacco industry. The authors sent a long letter in response, which the editor is reluctant to publish without more information on the authors' involvement with the tobacco industry. They are reluctant to comply.

The authors have also submitted another paper for consideration, which the editor has refused to consider until the other matter is resolved. The editor has offered to refer the case to the journal's ombudsman, but the authors have declined.

Further evidence revealed that the corresponding author had signed a consultancy contract with a tobacco company and has received research project funding from a cigarette manufacturers' association. The author was known to have undertaken lobbying for the industry outside his home country. The institution was aware of the author's undertakings, as previous allegations had been reported in their national press. They were embarrassed about it, but since the author had resigned from his post, the institution had not taken the matter any further.

What should be the next step?

Discussion/Advice

- The public should be made aware that the author had received sponsorship throughout his career, and had lied about it.
- An article should be written to highlight his past indiscretions and include the full history of the case. He should also be reported to the country's national research integrity council, pending the outcome of a libel case in which the author is involved.

Outcome

The editor received a subpoena to appear in court in relation to the libel case the author was pursuing against some researchers. During the hearing, evidence of even more serious allegations, including data tampering, came to light. The court found that the author's involvement in an unprecedented fraud was an accurate description.

A factual account of the court proceedings was published in the next edition of the journal along with a more detailed study, using evidence gathered during the case and exposing the tobacco company's action in establishing a secret facility to look at the health effects of passive smoking in a European country. The author in question was the link between this facility and the tobacco company, his role being to conceal the link. COPE's support had been an important consideration in the evidence presented at the court hearing.