



LETTERS

JUDGING BENEFITS AND HARMS OF MEDICINES

Credibility and trust are required to judge the benefits and harms of medicines

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Freer and Godlee consider the serious doubts held by both the public and the profession regarding drug efficacy and safety, and they lament the weak recommendations made by the Academy of Medical Sciences to tackle the fundamental problem of conflicts of interest in drug information.^{1,2}

Medical journals have a key role in accessing clinical trial and other evidence on drugs, so they ought to have robust policies on conflicts of interest. Progress in this area has been inconsistent, with some prominent journals taking a more “flexible” approach to conflicted authors.³ The International Society of Drug Bulletins (ISDB) is a worldwide network of journals that operate independently, both financially and intellectually, from the drug industry. Founded in 1986 with the support of the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, the ISDB’s rationale is that drug bulletins without industry funding avoid problems faced by editors of other journals—for example, in reporting the results of sponsored drug trials.⁴

Financial conflicts are, however, not the whole story, and ISDB has continued to debate its policies regarding conflicts of interest.⁵ At a recent extraordinary general meeting, ISDB members voted overwhelmingly to further strengthen the society’s policy on conflicts of interest, defined as any financial or advisory relationship (paid or unpaid) with the drug industry. ISDB decided that its editorial teams, and external authors

influencing treatment choices, must be completely free from conflicts of interest.

This policy change reflects the accumulating evidence of bias arising from both financial and advisory links with industry, as well as the recognition that disclosure of conflicts of interest is often inadequate and can, under some conditions, aggravate bias.⁶ Trust in doctors is largely determined by our perception of their knowledge and experience, and credible drug information requires that conflicts of interest are not merely managed but effectively excluded.

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