

**Handling conflicts of interests in
collaboration with partners
outside Academia**

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2021-12-01 - Radboud UMC Research Integrity round – maximally 20 minutes
plus minimally 10 minutes Q&A



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It's my view that today's topic is predominantly Conflict of Interest (col).

I also take the view that the issues we discuss today not only concern collaboration with for-profit partners but also with NGOs and governmental sponsors of research.



This slide shows some recent Dutch examples of negative publicity due to poor handling of conflicts of interest.

<https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2303489-wat-is-de-rol-van-deze-nederlandse-hoogleraar-bij-omstreden-paspoorthandel>

<https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2401439-directeur-alzheimercentrum-amsterdam-samenwerking-met-industrie-onvermijdelijk>

<https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2274735-de-wodc-affaire-in-perspectief>

https://www.erasmusmagazine.nl/en/2018/06/07/omstreden-rsm-onderzoek-stand-aan-de-basis-van-afschaffen-dividendbelasting/?noredirect=en_US

[Methodology Review]

Industry sponsorship and research outcome

Andreas Lundh¹, Joel Lexchin², Barbara Mintzes³, Jeppe B Schroll⁴, Lisa Bero⁵

Sponsorship of **drug and device studies** by the manufacturing company leads to **more favorable efficacy results** [RR: 1.27 (95% CI: 1.17 to 1.37)] and conclusions than sponsorship by other sources. Our analyses suggest the existence of an **industry bias** that cannot be explained by standard 'Risk of bias' assessments.

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There is rather convincing evidence that industry sponsored studies on drugs and medical devices on average are 30% more positive but it's difficult to say why exactly this is the case.

Lundh A, Lexchin J, Mintzes B, Schroll JB, Bero L. Industry sponsorship and research outcome. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2017, Issue 2. Art. No.: MR000033.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8132492/pdf/MR000033.pdf>

We should recognize that CoIs exist and need to be managed

- The single purpose of research is getting **valid and precise** answers to **relevant** questions
- Interests that distract from **truth finding** can come from:
 - **Funders** of research (for-profit, NGO, governmental)
 - **Research performing organisations**
 - **Other parties** (like journals and publishers)
 - Individual **researchers** and research groups

CONFLICT OF INTEREST



Distraction from Mertonian norms

Communism (scientific knowledge is not private property. Scientists must share it with the scientific community, otherwise knowledge cannot grow.)

Universalism (whether scientific knowledge is judged as true or false is judged by universal, objective criteria)

Disinterestedness (being committed to discovering knowledge for its own sake)

Organised scepticism (no knowledge claim is regarded as 'sacred'. Every idea open to questioning, criticism and objective investigation.)

Conflicts of Interest are deviations from the Mertonian norms that are at the core of all codes of conduct for research integrity

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mertonian_norms

Originally published as: Merton RK. Science and technology in a democratic order. *Journal of Legal and Political Sociology*. 1942; 1: 115-26.

Reproduced as Chapter 13 (p. 267 – 78) of Merton RK. *The sociology of science: theoretical and empirical investigations*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1973.

Standard 44: Be open and complete about the role of external stakeholders, commissioning parties, funding bodies, **possible conflicts of interest** and relevant **ancillary activities**.

Standard 54: Be open and honest about **your role** in the public debate and about the **nature and status** of your participation in it.

Standard 55: Be open and honest about **potential conflicts of interest**.



Like other codes of conduct for research integrity the Dutch code mandates transparency on Col but says little about what else needs to be done to handle it.

<https://www.vsnu.nl/files/documents/Netherlands%20Code%20of%20Conduct%20for%20Research%20Integrity%202018.pdf>

Forms of Conflict of Interest

Financial Col

- Direct personal gain (cash, stock, etc.)
- Indirect gain (e.g. spouse, family, institution)

Non-financial Col

- Strong convictions (e.g. intellectual, political, religious)
- Personal or institutional relationships

Non-financial Conflict of Interest are complex

- Research is not value free → difficult to tease out
- Having a motive to be interested in a topic is normal
- These motives can be good or bad, but views on that can differ
- One may not be aware of one's non-financial Cols
- Declaration of some Cols may be a breach of privacy
- Diversity of views suffers from ruling out strong convictions

Bero L. Addressing Bias and Conflict of Interest Among Biomedical Researchers. JAMA 2017; 317 1723-4

Bero LA, Grundy Q. Why Having a (Nonfinancial) Interest Is Not a Conflict of Interest. PLoS Biology 2016; 14 e2001221
<https://journals.plos.org/plosbiology/article?id=10.1371/journal.pbio.2001221>

- Which (non-)financial CoIs should be **disclosed**?
(criteria vary in nature and severity)

Rule of thumb: mention everything that would embarrass you if it would become known later

- When does a CoI imply **non-involvement**?
- How should we **adjust** for a CoI?
 - Lower the **level of evidence**?
 - Shrink the **effect size**?

Dal-Ré R, Bouter LM, Moher D, Marušić A. Mandatory disclosure of the financial interests of journals and editors. *BMJ* 2020; 370: m2872.

Measures to take against bias due to Col

- Operationalize transparency about interests clearly
- Enable transparency on interests institutionally or nationally (e.g. register of financial Col and ancillary functions)
- Plea for an international approach e.g. linked to ORCID
- Never accept publication vetoes and incorrect stopping rules
- Demand open methods, open codes and open data, but accept a reasonable embargo

US Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services' [Open Payments database](https://openpaymentsdata.cms.gov/).
<https://openpaymentsdata.cms.gov/>

VSNU sectorale regeling nevenwerkzaamheden: [https://www.rug.nl/about-ug/organization/rules-and-regulations/integrity/pdf/eng met aanvullingen en zonder faq sectorale regeling nevenwerkzaamheden.pdf](https://www.rug.nl/about-ug/organization/rules-and-regulations/integrity/pdf/eng_met_aanvullingen_en_zonder_faq_sectorale_regeling_nevenwerkzaamheden.pdf)



www.nrin.nl

[@NRIN_Integrity](https://www.instagram.com/NRIN_Integrity)

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See also the NRIN YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpfkyu491JJyWrC4qfMJErw/videos>