

Recommendations for Managing Conflict of Interest for Faculty and Students in Educational Programs in the Faculty of Health Sciences

Conflict of Interest

This document details recommendations directed to both faculty and students for managing conflict of interest in the Undergraduate and Graduate Education Programs of the Faculty of Health Sciences (including Post-graduate Medicine). “All faculty members holding academic appointments at McMaster University have an obligation to act with integrity in all research and education relationships and to avoid situations that place personal interest above interests that would be consistent with optimal academic integrity.”¹ Links to existing policies of McMaster University and the Faculty of Health Sciences that address conflict of interest in relation to research², consulting³ and Continuing Health Science Education⁴ are appended to this document.

Definition

Conflicts of interest have been defined by the Institute of Medicine as “circumstances that create a risk that professional judgments or actions regarding a primary interest will be unduly influenced by a secondary interest.”⁵ Primary interests include promoting and protecting the integrity of research, the quality of health science education and the welfare of patients. Secondary interests would include financial interests of the faculty or the pursuit of professional advancement and recognition and the desire to do favours for friends or students or colleagues. These secondary interests may be represented by several sectors in society, including “the commercial/private sector, government, non-governmental organisations, other research organisations and academic institutions”.¹ The collective term “external agency” will be used throughout this document to identify the various sectors. The Institute of Medicine conflict of interest guidelines and policies emphasise prevention and management rather than punishment. The central goal of conflict of interest policies in health care is to protect the integrity of professional judgement and to preserve public trust rather than remediating bias or mistrust after it has occurred.

The Institute of Medicine identified four criteria that should be addressed when considering the implementation of Conflict of Interest recommendations. They are as follows:

Proportionality

This requires the recommendation to be effective and efficient and directed at what the institution considers to be an important conflict of interest and the implementation of the recommendation should not unnecessarily interfere with the conduct of legitimate educational practice.

Transparency

This requires the recommendation to be comprehensible and accessible to all individuals and programs. This is required to ensure that recommendations are reasonable and being implemented fairly.

Accountability

All members of the institution, faculty and learners, need to be aware of who is responsible for monitoring and revising the recommendations. Faculty and students need to be made aware of the recommendations and thus an educational package should be developed.

Fairness

This requires that the recommendations apply equally to all relevant groups within the Faculty of Health Sciences including faculty, clinical staff, students, residents, and senior institutional officials.

Guidelines

Access by external agencies to learners

- External agencies should only gain access to the faculty by appointment or when invited by somebody within the Faculty. Involvement of learners in such meetings should occur only for educational purposes and under the supervision of a faculty member. While faculty members may develop mechanisms whereby the organisations can provide educational information on their products or services to learners, this should be done in a setting that provides the opportunity for interaction and critical evaluation and is supervised by the faculty. Furthermore, learners should not be exposed to curriculum materials developed solely by external agencies.

Clinical Placements

- There are situations within the health professional education programs in the clinical placement setting, where potential conflicts of interests may occur for faculty, students or preceptors. Students should not be preceptored in a clinical placement where they have been or are currently employed. (e.g. a midwifery student working as a maternity nurse). Students should not be preceptored by family members.

Educational Materials

- Any educational materials provided by external agencies to complement curriculum should be closely vetted by faculty who bear the responsibility for ensuring that learners are not exposed to a biased presentation of the evidence.

Food

- With the exception of food provided in connection with accredited curriculum programming and educational rounds/journal clubs for undergraduate, graduate, or continuing health sciences education events, food and meals supplied by outside agencies should be considered as personal gifts and should be prohibited either on or off site for students and faculty in the Faculty of Health Sciences. In particular, education events organised by outside agencies for learners which are catered should be prohibited. It is not a conflict of interest for pooled funds from external agencies to be given to Departments/Programs to provide food for educational events where the educational content is determined by the Department or Program.

“Ghost-writing”

- Learners in the Faculty of Health Science should not accept written material produced on their behalf but ghost-written by external agencies. This applies particularly to the preparation of papers for publication, abstracts for presentation at academic meetings or assignments required by the educational program.

Gifts to individuals

- Since there is some evidence that gifts of any value affect the objectivity of decision making and that one-on-one gifting relationships of all kinds can induce feelings of reciprocity in recipients that can unwittingly bias decision making in favour of the donors interests, acceptance of any gifts from external agencies should be prohibited⁵.

Sponsored Scholarships and Educational Funds

- Any scholarships or other educational funds provided by external agencies should be given centrally to the faculty or educational program and the evaluation and selection of recipients of such funds should be the sole responsibility of the faculty or educational program with no involvement by the donor.

Travel

- Individual learners and faculty should not accept funds directly from external agencies for travel to such events as national academic meetings other than when the individual learner is providing a legitimate contractual service. There is no conflict of interest if unrestricted funding for travel grants or bursaries is provided to Departments or Programs by external agencies.

How to Handle a Potential Conflict of Interest

When a faculty member or learner in the Faculty of Health Sciences perceives a potential conflict of interest or is unsure how to proceed in a particular situation the person should contact either the Assistant Dean of the appropriate education program or the department chair for guidance. If approval for an activity has been granted by someone with the authority to do so, the activity will not be deemed to be a conflict of interest.

References

- (1) Guidelines Regarding Management of Commercial/Private Sector/Government Relationships in Research and Education. FHS, McMaster 2008.
- (2) Statement on Conflict of Interest in Research. – found at <http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy>
- (3) Statement on Consulting Policy and Procedures – found at <http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy>
- (4) CHSE guidelines – found at http://fhs.mcmaster.ca/conted/industry_collaboration.html
- (5) Dane, J. How Psychological Research Can Inform Policies for dealing with Conflict of Interest in Medicine: in Conflict of Interest in Medical Research, Education, and Practice. Bernard Lo and Marilyn J. Field, Editors, National Academic Press. 2009. p358-374.