

# Conflict of Interest Defined and How you can Recognize the Risks

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([conflict-of-interest.net](http://conflict-of-interest.net))

## A Common Perception



## Definitions: Conflict of Interest

*“A situation in which a person has a private or personal interest sufficient to appear to influence the objective exercise of his or her official duties as, say, a public official, an employee, or a professional.”*

- (MacDonald, McDonald and Norman 2002)

*A researcher is in a COI “if and only if he or she has personal, financial, professional, or political interests **that have a significant chance of compromising the judgment of the average [professional] in the conduct of [their professional activities].”***

- (Resnik 2007)

*“A set of circumstances that creates a risk that professional judgment or actions regarding a primary interest will be unduly influenced by a secondary interest.”*

- (Institute of Medicine 2009)

## Financial Interests



## Non-financial Interests

*“If there’s no money, there’s no conflict...”*

- Tendency to focus on what’s measurable (\$\$\$)
  - Non-financial interests often ignored completely
  - Given much less attention in policies
- Not considered very harmful
  - Less problematic than financial interests
- Recognize the threat to professional identity
  - Objectivity, neutrality, independence

Non-financial interests can be especially problematic, because they are ***less easily recognized*** and so ***less understood***.

## Why Pay Attention to COI?



- Risks to quality of:
  - Research
  - Teaching
  - Management
  - Professional judgment
  - Service provision...
- Threat to institutional financing:
  - Universities
  - Government agencies
  - Public programs...

## A Question of Trust



Would you trust someone (or an institution) in a COI?  
If not, why?

## Some Distinctions

- **Real:** The interest actually influences professional judgement
  - E.g., hiring a family member instead of the best candidate for a position
- **Potential:** The COI or appearance of a COI could occur
  - E.g., a physician solicited by industry representatives for a meeting
- **Apparent:** No actual bias or failure in judgment, but could be perceived as such
  - E.g., member of an expert panel alongside industry representatives



## Managing COI: Standard Advice



Being in a COI is not unethical...the issue is how you manage it.

### Guidance:

1. Identify COI, avoid when possible
2. Disclose to all concerned
3. Remove person from sensitive decisions

*Sometimes 1 and 3 are impossible so 2 (transparency) becomes crucial.*

## Case Study: Sodium Working Group

*Canadians' intake of sodium is well above recommended amounts, and has a strong relationship with hypertension and its sequelae. It is estimated that 77% of dietary sodium comes from processed foods, while 11% is added by individuals during cooking and at the table. The federal government has set up a Sodium Working Group to address concerns from the medical community and the general public on sodium consumption and to make recommendations on how to reduce sodium consumption by Canadians. As a public health physician with expertise in nutrition and diet, you have been asked to be a member of the group. You find that the group has a high level of representation from industry, with diminished representation from experts in medicine/public health, policy, and behavioural sciences.*

## Questions to Ask

- What guidance do you have regarding COI?
  - Institutional policies?
  - Codes of ethics/conduct?
- Name the stakeholders
  - Who's involved and what are their interests?
- Is the COI problematic, and for whom?
  - real/potential/apparent?
  - financial/non-financial?
- Risks / benefits of different resolution strategies?