Reporting disclosures to the reader in plastic surgery journal publications

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BACKGROUND: With the associations between investigators and funding sources becoming increasingly complicated, conflicts of interest may arise that could potentially cause biases in the reporting of results.

OBJECTIVE: To determine the number of published plastic surgery articles that lack reporting of disclosures.

METHODS: An online review of four major North American plastic surgery journal publications from January 1, 2007 to December 31, 2007, was performed. For identification and to provide anonymity, journals were assigned a letter from A to D.

RESULTS: Of the 1759 articles reviewed, 726 (41%) were included. Disclosure was not reported in 368 (51%) articles: Journal A (n=10, 3%), Journal B (n=153, 85%), Journal C (n=193, 93%) and Journal D (n=12, 32%). Journals differed significantly in their reporting of disclosure ($P<0.01$).

CONCLUSION: In the plastic surgery journals reviewed, the lack of documentation of disclosures was frequent. To ensure identification of bias in plastic surgery publications, a section dedicated to disclosure statements is recommended for each published article.

Key Words: Bias; Conflicts of interest; Disclosure; Plastic surgery; Publication

There is no denying the complex, yet necessary relationships that exist among investigators, academic institutions, funding agencies and the industries that advance biomedical research (1-3). Within these interactions, there may arise conflicts of interest (COI) regarding financial interests, or personal, professional, political and intellectual interests that can potentially cause biases in the reporting of results (1, 4-7). For these reasons, disclosures have become a crucial component in the publication of studies. Biomedical research publishers rely on the integrity of the author to prevent fraud (6,8), and this trust is dependent on and maintained by the transparency provided by the use of journal-specific disclosure forms (2,8) and by the authors abiding to the Declaration of Helsinki (9). Furthermore, an integral part of an editor's evaluation of a manuscript involves access to the disclosure(s). The need for access to disclosures also applies to readers when formulating their own interpretation of published results (10). Reporting of COI should be systematically applied in the surgical literature.

With regard to the plastic surgery publishing community, the need for the transparency of disclosures from manuscript submission to final print has previously been addressed (2). While plastic surgery journals require authors to complete disclosure forms when submitting studies for publication, this information is not uniformly made available to the reader (11-14). The objective of the present study was to determine the frequency of the lack of disclosure statements in articles published in four North American plastic surgery journals.

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La transmission des divulgations au lecteur dans les publications des revues de chirurgie plastique

HISTORIQUE : Puisque les associations entre les chercheurs et les sources de financement deviennent de plus en plus complexes, des conflits d'intérêts risquent de biaiser la transmission des résultats.

OBJECTIF : Déterminer le nombre d'articles de chirurgie plastique publiés qui ne transmettent pas les divulgations de conflits d'intérêts.

MÉTHODOLOGIE : Les chercheurs ont procédé à une analyse virtuelle des publications de quatre grandes revues nord-américaines de chirurgie plastique entre le 1^{er} janvier 2007 et le 31 décembre 2007. Afin de les identifier tout en conservant leur anonymat, les revues étaient désignées par les lettres A à D.

RÉSULTATS : Des 1 759 articles examinés, 726 (41 %) ont été inclus. Dans 368 articles (51 %), la divulgation n'était pas indiquée : revue A (n=10, 3 %), revue B (n=153, 85 %), revue C (n=193, 93 %) et revue D (n=12, 32 %). La transmission des divulgations de conflits d'intérêts différait considérablement selon les revues ($P<0,01$).

CONCLUSION : Dans les revues de chirurgie plastique examinées, on constatait fréquemment l'absence de divulgation. Afin d'assurer la divulgation des conflits d'intérêts dans les publications de chirurgie plastique, il est recommandé de prévoir une rubrique consacrée aux énoncés de divulgation dans chaque article publié.

METHODS

An online review of four prominent North American plastic surgery journal publications from January 1, 2007 to December 31, 2007 was performed. The journals reviewed were: the *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery Journal* (PRS), the *Annals of Plastic Surgery* (Annals), the *Journal of Plastic, Reconstructive, and Aesthetic Surgery* (JPRAS), and the *American Journal of Aesthetic Surgery* (Aesthetic). Journals were assigned a letter for the purpose of identification and to provide anonymity. All publications were reviewed by three authors for statements of disclosure including, but not limited to, funding and/or author affiliations. The review excluded articles involving basic science, bench work, animal and cadaveric studies, instructional course lectures, correspondence, discussions, letters to the editor and other nonhuman-related studies. These articles were excluded because only studies whose findings are directly applicable to clinical practice were included.

Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS version 16 (IBM Corporation, USA). Outcomes among journals were compared using the χ^2 test. $P<0.05$ was considered to be statistically significant.

RESULTS

Of a total of 1759 identified articles, 726 (41%) were included in the present review (Figure 1). Statements of disclosure were not present in 368 (51%) articles (Figure 1). In descending order, the lack of

Figure 1) Schematic of the review process. Basic science, bench work, animal and cadaveric studies, instructional course lectures, correspondence, discussions, letters to the editor and other nonhuman-related studies were excluded

disclosure frequency was: Journal C (n=193, 93%); Journal B (n= 153, 85%); Journal D (n=12, 32%) and Journal A (n=10, 3%). All the journals differed significantly with respect to the rates of reporting disclosures ($P<0.01$) (Table 1).

DISCUSSION

During 2007, the four journals reviewed demonstrated significant differences in the frequency of reporting disclosures to the reader. This discrepancy might be explained by journals addressing the growing movement to include disclosures within published manuscripts at different time periods (2,15-17). Furthermore, the location of the disclosure statement differed among the journals, with it being located at the beginning, end or even within the article text itself. Journal A was the only journal to have a dedicated section for reporting conflict of interest, which was placed on the first page of every article under the heading "Disclosure". Having a dedicated disclosure section appears to correlate with Journal A's high rate of reporting COI (97%) within its published articles compared with the other journals: Journal D (68%), Journal B (15%) and Journal C (7%).

The articles included in the present review predominantly used human subjects and reported findings that could influence clinical practices. In this situation, the reader's ability to have easy access to an

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TABLE 1

Comparisons of the rate of reporting disclosures among Journals A, B, C and D

	n (%)	P
All journals	368 (45)	
Journal A vs Journal B	10 (3) vs 153 (85)	<0.0001
Journal A vs Journal C	10 (3) vs 193 (93)	<0.0001
Journal A vs Journal D	10 (3) vs 12 (32)	<0.0001
Journal B vs Journal C	153 (85) vs 193 (93)	<0.01
Journal B vs Journal D	153 (85) vs 12 (32)	<0.0001
Journal C vs Journal D	193 (93) vs 12 (32)	<0.0001

vs Versus

author's disclosures would influence the reader's decision to incorporate the proposed method into their management options. Furthermore, in the cases of industry-sponsored studies, the reader can decide whether 'generic' products could also be used.

In the medical literature, the inclusion of disclosures has become more common and the efforts, in both the acquisition and publishing of such information, has become cooperative. For example, the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) is presently introducing a standardized disclosure form for all authors submitting to journals affiliated with the ICMJE (5,18). While the form may initially be exhaustive, in the long term it is believed that it will make future disclosure reporting easier because authors will only have to update their online form for the new information to be easily incorporate into future publications. To our knowledge, such an initiative does not currently exist among plastics surgery journals, but the plastic surgery community must not fall behind.

While the present journal review was limited to journal articles published in 2007, it is a benchmark for a future literary review and hopefully will encourage plastic surgery authors and publishers to keep pace and implement current publishing practices.

CONCLUSION

Disclosure forms for authors should be thorough, but also author friendly by having standardized forms and/or online disclosure information banks that are available to the public and can be easily updated by authors. Every journal should include within each article the disclosures of the authors. A dedicated and easy to read section at the beginning of each article would be advantageous because it allows the reader to be aware of any potential biases before reading.

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