Preventing disease
Promoting and protecting health
Conflict of Interest

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Date: 30th November, 2016.

Preventing disease, promoting and protecting health
Objectives:

To ensure familiarity with:

- The term ‘Conflict of Interest’
- Examples of ‘Conflict of Interest’ in research
- Management of cases involving ‘Conflict of Interest’
Overview:

• Defining ‘Conflict of Interest’

• Examples of ‘Conflict of Interest’

• Managing ‘Conflict of Interest’

• Summary
Cases

Preventing disease, promoting and protecting health
Case – Conflict of Interest

• John, a third-year graduate student, is participating in a department-wide seminar where students, postdocs, and faculty members discuss work in progress.

• An assistant professor prefaces her comments by saying that the work she is about to discuss is sponsored by both a federal grant and a biotechnology firm for which she consults.

• In the course of the talk John realizes that he has been working on a technique that could make a major contribution to the work being discussed.

• But his faculty advisor consults for a different, and competing, biotechnology firm.
Case - Questions

• Is there a conflict of interest in this case?

• Should John discuss this technique with the assistant professor?

• What, if anything, should he say to his advisor?

• When should the matter be discussed with his advisor?
Conflict of Interest (COI)

- A conflict of interest may occur when a
  - clinician, researcher, public official, IRB member, university official, author, reviewer, editor
- allows a secondary interest
  - financial gain, publication opportunity, career advancement, outside employment, personal considerations, relationships, investments, gifts
- to interfere with a primary interest
  - patient welfare, research validity, publication of research, obligation to act in the best interest of another
Conflict of Interest

• Occurs when secondary interest distorts or has the potential to distort a judgement related to primary interest
Conflict of Interest

…when a personal interest, situation or circumstance, tangible or intangible, has the potential to result in a researcher being 

unduly influenced or coerced with respect to the subject matter under consideration
Conflict of Interest

Researcher should NOT engage in:

- **Coercion** – overt threat or harm

- **Undue influence** – offer of excessive or inappropriate reward
Tangible or Intangible

- **Tangible** – quantifiable/measurable
  - Financial
  - Intellectual property rights

- **Intangible** – scholarly/academic, professional or social concerns
  - Delays in publishing for personal advantage
  - Individual bias to validate research
  - Intellectual bias
Ethical Concerns Raised by COI

- Potential bias
- Perceived deception
- Loss of trust
Conflict of Interest

• Affects:
  - validity of study aim
  - Design
  - Conduct
  - Data
  - Conclusions

• May compromise
  - the well being of participants in clinical research
Examples of COIs in Research

• Conflicting Financial Interests
• Impartiality in Performing Official Duties
• Gifts
Conflicting Financial Interests

- Salary, fees or other forms of income
- Employment interests
  - professional position
  - title
Impartiality in Performing Official Duties

• Could legitimately question degree of fairness

• Implies bias or favouritism
Impartiality in Performing Official Duties

- **Fairness**
  - A researcher should consider his/her level of involvement in the study.
  - A researcher should **not** act in a manner that will lead others to question his/her fairness.
    - E.g. Fairness can be questioned if you work on a project that can directly benefit a relative.
Impartiality in Performing Official Duties

• **Favouritism**
  - Involving someone who paid you a salary, fee or other
  - Involving an individual with whom you have a close personal or professional relationship
Gifts

- Gratuity
- Favour
- Discount
- Entertainment
- Hospitality
- Loan
- Other items having monetary value
Managing Conflict of Interest

• Review by REC
  - determine if any COIs exist
  - Protect human subjects

• Conflict management plan
  - Public Disclosure of the COI
  - Modification of research plan
  - Monitoring by independent reviewers
  - Divestment of financial interests
  - Appointment of non-conflicted research personnel
Conflict of Interest

- **Small world**
  - COIs likely to occur

- **REC**
  - Should maintain their independence when doing review

- **Researchers**
  - Should strive to avoid COI
COMPAS-Synflorix Case

- Started in 2007
- Stopped in 2008
- Exploited poor communities
- Disrespected rights of human subjects
- 14 deaths
- Weak IC process
- Conflict of interest
• Poor Latin American countries were exploited

• Irregularities in selection procedure

• Undue influence – payment of some HS

• Poor data management - demographics were NOT completely documented
Case of Conflict of Interest

• COI involves exploitation for personal/financial gains

• Pharmaceutical company paid private REC to approve study

• Doctors were paid to recruit participants + recruited their own patients
  - US$350 paid for each one of the 13,981 participants
Case of Conflict of Interest

• Very high incentives (~US$5 million)
  - undue influence

• Conflict of Interest
  - interfered with the inclusion + exclusion criteria of the study

• Therapeutic misconception
  - an issue of concern
  - doctors recruited own patients for study
Conflict of Interest

- Role-based
- Dual roles
- **Real or perceived**
  - REC should be informed of possible COI
- **Manage COI:**
  - not recruit directly
  - stay blind to participation until after relationship ends
  - may have to abandon one’s interest
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Case – Conflict of Interest

• John’s case **DOES NOT** describe a financial conflict of interest

  **BUT**

• his wanting to share the progress of his research with a representative of the competitors, without first discussing the matter with his faculty advisor is **conflicting**

• If John were to discuss his research with the assistant professor, he will be paving a path for **exploitation by the competitors** + possibly **harm the relationship with his faculty advisor**
Case – Conflict of Interest

- **Reputational interest**
  - probably triggered John to want to disclose the progress of his work with the competitors

- Irrespective of his motives
  - **policies** must be strictly enforced to reduce or possibly eliminate conflicts of interest

- Being **objective** is vital in ensuring **fair, reliable + valid research outcomes**
Case – Conflict of Interest

- Recognizing conflicts of interest will promote:
  - objectivity
  - minimize or eliminate unethical practices in research
Case – Conflict of Interest

• Unlike John’s case, COI may also be apparent among:
  ❑ members of a research ethics committee (REC)

• CIOMS’ guidelines
  ❑ emphasize the need for REC members to avoid conflict of interest as they strive to:
    ➢ maintain ethics in research
    ➢ promote ethics in research
Case – Conflict of Interest

• Policies

- aim to manage conflict of interest
- should be implemented to eliminate bias in one’s judgment
- should be implemented to maintain trust
- must **promote transparency** to better facilitate recognition of conflict of interest
SUMMARY
Summary

• Conflicts of interest can influence:
  - conduct of research
  - research integrity

• Policies
  - must be implemented to effectively manage COI
Summary

• **Protect human subjects** when there is COI

• **Researchers + RECs**
  - should follow written policies/procedures to ensure that research is conducted without COIs

• **COIs must be**
  • Identified
  • Managed
  • Minimized
  • Eliminated
Discussion

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"What conflict of interest?! I work here in my spare time."
CARPHA Thanks You!!!

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References:

