

SCIENCE

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Information for Contributors appears on pages 40–42 of the 1 January 1993 issue. Editorial correspondence, including requests for permission to reprint and reprint orders, should be sent to 1333 H Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005.

LETTERS

Journal Policies on Conflict of Interest

Daniel E. Koshland Jr.'s editorial (2 July, p. 11) in response to my commentary on conflict of interest policies in science, which appeared in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (1), criticizes my arguments without addressing them or even mentioning what they are. Koshland quotes my article twice, both times incorrectly.

Current policies on conflict of interest that are in place for *Science* and other journals imply that authors' affiliations, funding sources, financial interests, intellectual passions, and perhaps even sexual orientation or religion (1, 2) should be somehow taken into account when one reads a paper. I have argued that these policies are counterproductive; by shifting the attention of readers away from content, journals are encouraging ad hominem evaluations and thereby reducing the overall objectivity of scientific discourse. These policies are also ethically questionable, because they impugn authors with the implied accusation of wrongdoing without evidence and without recourse. Ad hominem evaluation of work is unfair to those authors who have not compromised their professionalism despite the fact that they may work for industry, government, Greenpeace, the AIDS Action Committee, or any other organization. In his editorial, Koshland does not begin to address the specific issues that I raised.

Koshland's editorial does have the virtue of illustrating some of the dangers of hurling around labels as a method of "protecting" readers. His anecdote about the captain and first mate illustrates one of my points, as it shows how labels can be simultaneously both truthful and misleading. Koshland states that "the truth taken out of context can be deceptive and pejorative." Indeed, where is the evidence that attaching the label of "conflict of interest" to an author avoids more problems than it inflicts?

The justification offered for editorial policies on conflict of interest is that gullible readers need to be protected by savvy editors from the dangers of reading biased work. Editors should eschew the arrogance that presumes readers need this type of "protection."

Kenneth J. Rothman

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References

1. K. J. Rothman, *J. Am. Med. Assoc.* **269**, 2782 (1993).
2. E. Marshall, *Science* **257**, 620 (1992).

Response: Rothman makes many points with which I can agree, but his basic conclusion—that journals should "keep the revelations about potential conflicts [of interest] out of the review process" (1, p. 2784)—is impossible, in my opinion. A policy on conflict of interest should be as wise and as fair as possible. If a professor at university X argues that a great new national facility such as a supercollider be located at university X, we might print his article if it is well-reasoned and approved by peer review, but the readers are entitled to know the professor is from university X. If this professor has a consultancy with venture capital company Y, we are not likely to know it from his address or title, but our editors are entitled to know this affiliation in case he should review work related to company Y. Information that is not obvious from the title or address of an individual, such as consultancies, stock options, long-time political advocacy, and so forth, need to be taken into account. We do not reject advice from such individuals; we only wish to be able to take it in context. We require the same information of our staff, our reviewers, and our authors. The editor-in-chief, who has the final authority, must (and does) take responsibility for the danger of ad hominem extrapolations as well as naïve disregard for subliminal influences. A policy that is fair to our readers and authors cannot be eliminated because of the possibility that others could misuse the information it produces. The test of the policy will depend on its wise and fair application.

—Daniel E. Koshland Jr.

References

- K. J. Rothman, *J. Am. Med. Assoc.* **269**, 2782 (1993).

The End of Public Higher Education?

Public higher education supported by state governments is one of the truly great achievements of the United States. Thomas Jefferson, the several land grant acts, the generosity and foresight of the pioneer builders of the west, and sustained support