Author’s response to reviews

Title: Addressing Conflicts of Interest in Public Private Partnerships

Authors:

Emmanuel B Omobowale (ebomobowale@yahoo.com)
Michael Kuziw (michael.kuziw@mrcglobal.org)
Melinda Treurnicht-Naylor (meilnda.treurnichtnaylor@mrcglobal.org)
Abdallah S Daar (abdallah.daar@mrcglobal.org)
Peter A Singer (peter.singer@mrcglobal.org)

Version: 2 Date: 7 June 2010

Author's response to reviews: see over
Dear editor,

RE: 2137760763353423 – Addressing Conflicts of Interest in Public Private Partnerships.

We apologize for the delay in re-submitting the revised manuscript. There was a personal tragedy in the lead author’s family. The authors wish to thank the three reviewers for their helpful feedback. Please see below a point-by-point response of each reviewer’s comments.

We look forward to hearing back from you.

Yours sincerely,

Emmanuel B. Omobowale
Emmanuel.omobowale@mrcglobal.org

Michael Kuziw

Melinda Treurnicht Naylor

Abdallah S. Daar

Peter A. Singer

Author’s response to reviewers’ reports:

Please note that the reviewers’ report has been highlighted in bold italics. The author’s point-by-point response to the comments follows immediately thereafter in regular text.

Reviewer’s report

Title: Addressing Conflicts of Interest in Public Private Partnerships

Version: 1 Date: 27 January 2010

Reviewer: David Resnik

Reviewer’s report:
I found this to be an interesting article on a topic that has not been discussed much in the literature.

Discretionary revisions
After reading this article, I was left wondering whether the COIs related to public-private partnerships are more worrisome or less worrisome than the COIs in industry-sponsored research or other COIs. Do they pose a greater (or lesser) threat to the integrity of medicine and biomedical research than other COIs? The authors might offer some speculations on these topics.

AUTHOR RESPONSE:
This is a good question but beyond the scope of the study since we examined only public-private partnerships. We would imagine that there is perhaps more variation in the
‘worrisomeness’ of COI within each of these categories, depending on the specifics, rather than between them. Thanks for raising this interesting question for further reflection. We have not modified the manuscript.

Level of interest: An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.

Reviewer’s report
Title: Addressing Conflicts of Interest in Public Private Partnerships

Version: 1 Date: 30 January 2010

Reviewer: Robert Holloway

Reviewer’s report:
The manuscript addresses an important topic in public-private partnerships, which has received little prior attention.

Major Compulsory Revisions (which the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

1. The term public-private partnership requires clarification. In particular, what is considered public: non-profits, government agencies, academic institutions, anything that is not for-profit.

AUTHOR RESPONSE:
Terms “private” and “public” have been clarified in the opening paragraph of the paper. By public we mean non-profit and by private we mean for profit organizations.

2. The article moves directly from introduction to discussion. As a result, it currently reads like a loosely done research effort with a discussion that states the authors’ opinions. I would have liked to see a more structured methodological approach of PPP selection, data abstraction, presenting the results, and formulating the discussion based on the results.

AUTHOR RESPONSE:
This structure of the paper is as required by the format of a Debate paper. We have made clear at the end of the introduction that “this was not a comprehensive survey of every PPP, but rather an attempt to highlight actual practices.”

3. The authors conclude that more emphasis is needed for independent external monitoring, but it is not clear why they make this recommendation. It is not based on the
results of their web-based review. Can they explain why they think this is the best way to manage COI in PPPs. External monitoring would require a tremendous effort and it is not clear how best to implement, and sustain this effort in a coordinated and cost-effective way. The same issue applies for why they recommend a web-based system as a forum to discuss these issues, although it is not clear from the data presented why this would be the case.

AUTHOR RESPONSE:
Thank you. We have removed the claim about external monitoring from the introduction. We have also eased back on the strength of this recommendation in the conclusion. Finally, we have included a reference to a Social Audit to provide an example of an external monitoring of an agricultural PPP which proved itself as an effective way of preventing COIs – Reference #15: Ezezika O, Thomas F, Lavery JV, Daar AS, Singer PA (2009). “A Social Audit Model for Agro-biotechnology Initiatives in Developing Countries: Accounting for Ethical, Social, Cultural, and Commercialization Issues” Journal of Technology Management & Innovation, Vol. 4(3): 24-33.

Discretionary Revisions (which are recommendations for improvement but which the author can choose to ignore)

1. Can the author provide any past examples of COI issues with PPPs. This would provide a better context for their project.

AUTHOR RESPONSE:
It was our intent to provide constructive guidance. We did not seek out particular incidences of malfeasance.

2. They should also make explicit if they reviewed policies that deal with individual, institutional COI, or both. Both are highly relevant.

AUTHOR RESPONSE:
We have clarified this in the opening paragraph.

3. Do the authors have any estimation of the amount of PPP that exist, at least within the areas of global health and agriculture? Otherwise, it is hard to estimate the potential for selection bias which most certainly exists and should be acknowledged as a limitations.

AUTHOR RESPONSE:
The authors estimate that there are about 30 PPPs in global health and somewhat less in agriculture. As a very varied lot where some PPPs are very small, the authors have tried to identify the more prominent ones within the paper. Please also see the authors’ response to this reviewer’s Major Compulsory Revision comment #2.

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

1. There are few typos throughout (“The is a need....”, ‘comppletion”)

AUTHOR RESPONSE:
These amendments have been made. Thank you.
Reviewer’s report

Title: Addressing Conflicts of Interest in Public Private Partnerships

Version: 1 Date: 6 February 2010

Reviewer: Joel Lexchin

Reviewer’s report:
This article looks at how different public-private partnerships deal with conflicts-of-interest (COI) and what different organizations can learn from each other. While potentially useful there are significant problems with the manuscript in its present form.

Major compulsory revisions:

1. There are two ways to try and deal with COI, to manage it or to eliminate it as much as possible. For the most part the authors have focused on managing COI rather than trying to eliminate it and they need to justify why they have chosen that position.

AUTHOR RESPONSE:
The authors believe that in PPPs, which by their nature combine public and private interests, COI is inevitable. We have made this point in the opening paragraph. Eliminating COIs in PPPs is tantamount to eliminating PPPs.

2. Furthermore, the authors appear to be defining COI rather narrowly to refer to instances where individuals may have conflicts arising from situations where there is a direct COI, e.g., a financial benefit that may accrue to someone. A broader definition of COI would be that individuals have conflicts based on an ongoing relationship with organizations regardless of specific situations or decisions that are being considered.

AUTHOR RESPONSE:
The authors utilize a literature definition of a COI (see Reference #1) and highlight what the institutions themselves say about COI. Nevertheless, the point is well taken and we have mentioned that COI may be financial or non-financial in the opening paragraph.

3. There is nothing about the methodology employed in this article. Why did the authors choose the PPPs that they did, how did they choose the key points in the policies to focus on, how was data extracted from the policies.

AUTHOR RESPONSE:
Please refer to authors’ response for Reviewer #2’s Major Compulsory Revision #2.

Minor essential revisions:

Page 2: Explain what is meant by the term “good governance”.

AUTHOR RESPONSE:  
The term “good governance” has been changed to just read “governance” throughout the manuscript. Thank you.

Page 2: How are board members to be selected? Are board members themselves subject to searches for any potential COIs?

AUTHOR RESPONSE:  
This was speculation on our part. The sentence has been deleted from the third paragraph of the paper. Thank you.

Page 3: It’s not clear to me what makes the policies of PATH “broad” and “complete”.

AUTHOR RESPONSE:  
The sentence “PATH has some of the broadest and most complete COI guidelines in the PPP field” on Page 3 has been removed. Thank you.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:  
I declare that I have no competing interests

The authors would like to take the opportunity to thank the reviewers once again for their helpful review of this work.

Emmanuel B. Omobowale  
CORRESPONDING AUTHOR