



TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY  
Ethics Center™

## Red Raider Ethics Generator

### Don't Let Conflicts of Interest Mislead You

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Rial D. Rolfe, Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Professor in the Dept of Microbiology & Immunology  
Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center

Scientists seek the truth to better understand the world around them. The practice of science has always been based on a foundation of honesty and objectivity. However, in recent years this foundation has been shaken to the core by an increasing number of scientists reporting inaccurate and misleading information.

There are undoubtedly a number of factors responsible for this perceived increase in scientific fraud, and one of the more important ones is conflict of interest.

A conflict of interest is a situation in which an individual, such as a scientist, has competing professional or personal interests, which may compromise impartiality in decision-making.

For example, a scientist holding a patent to a new blood pressure medication compares the efficacy of his or her product to a competitor's medication. Can the scientist be impartial when the results of the study will dramatically affect royalty income for the scientist?

Or what about a scientist employed by a pharmaceutical company asked to review and critique the research of another scientist working for a competing pharmaceutical company?

Several years ago, the pharmaceutical company Merck developed the drug Vioxx, used to treat the inflammation and pain of arthritis. Conflict of interest controversy surrounded this drug almost from the day it was introduced to the market.

A top U.S. cardiologist and vocal critic of Vioxx was forced to defend his stance when it was reported he had ties to a hedge fund that predicted Merck's stock would fall in value. It was also reported that 10 of the 32 Food and Drug Administration advisers, whose total votes favored Vioxx, had financial ties to the industry.

Conflict of interest is not only important in the scientific world but occurs throughout society. There are more than a dozen Texas Tech University and Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center operating policies that describe conflicts of interest ranging from tutoring (faculty must avoid charging a fee for tutoring any student enrolled in the faculty member's classes) to the sale of textbooks and other educational material (using textbooks in classes taught by the authors).

Conflicts of interest are not, within themselves, wrong or unusual. A conflict of interest exists even if no unethical or improper acts result. In fact, it is neither possible nor desirable to avoid all competing interests. However, a conflict of interest can create an appearance of impropriety and may compromise the integrity of an individual or institution.

Therefore, it is important to eliminate or minimize the deleterious impact that conflicts of interest have on decision-making. This is best accomplished by individuals and institutions recognizing, declaring and managing their conflicts of interest.

Journals require authors of research publications to disclose any financial conflicts of interest related to the subject matter of their research. Many granting agencies have established conflict of interest guidelines that extend to spouses and minor children.

As competition for government-sponsored research funds increase, universities and their faculty are entering into business relations with the private sector. There is growing concern that universities and faculty with financial interests in commercial ventures may lose objectivity in decision-making.

Texas Tech University and Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center require full disclosure of conflicts of interest on the part of all faculty and administration. Both institutions assume conflicts occur in the conduct of normal activities.

However, it is important that any significant potential for conflicts of interest be disclosed, reviewed and, where necessary, managed by the institution.

It is important to always be mindful of your conflicts of interest and work to manage the intentional and unintentional biases these conflicts may have on your everyday decision-making.