

Editorial

And the door is locked

An editor honors authors with trust, just as readers put their trust in an editor, the editorial staff, and the reviewers. Has the time come when this hard-won trust must go the way of the unlocked front door or the handshake to seal an agreement of days gone by?

In small town America of yesteryear, people did not lock their doors. Now, most unfortunately, in many cases people realize that it is better to be safe than trusting. And the door is locked. The trust between homeowner and passerby has waned as confidence was breached and suspicion grew.

Just as in society in general, where the viability of trust in others is being constantly challenged, so in publishing the ability to rely on the integrity of the author is under scrutiny. Trust has been an integral part of science and scientific publishing, but will the door soon have to be locked here too?

Regrettably, we are now in an age where it is much easier to deceive an editor, and therefore the readers, than ever before. A slide submitted as an original with a paper could well have undergone a digital remake in the author's computer. In fact, it is completely possible to produce "before" and "after" treatment slides showing beautiful esthetic "porcelain" crowns, and perfectly recontoured and healthy soft tissues. The only problem is that the "treatment" was completed sitting at a computer by manipulating a slide image that has been digitized on a computer screen. The patient still has the pretreatment appearance; but the "postoperative" slide shows superb "dentistry" by an author posing as a great clinician. How would an editor or a reviewer know that this "treatment" has not taken place? While technology is morally neutral, the morality of new technology use depends on the integrity of the user.

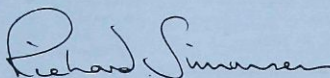
Another particularly galling area of abuse is the author who fails to report areas of potential conflict of interest. Information that should, without question, be made known to an editor for disclosure to readers includes financial support for a study from interested parties, or the author's own involvement in the development or commercial production of a product. Recently, a paper published in a respected journal reported excellent results with a commercial product. What was not disclosed to the editor, or, therefore, the readers, was that the authors included the inventor of the product being "tested."

The important question is not so much whether an inventor or patent-holder can do honorable research, or report honestly how a particular invention performs—of course this can, and does, happen. Nor is there a question whether research funded by a company on one of its own products can be carried out candidly. It can be done. Suspicion, however, grows when assessing the integrity of anyone involved in a study or publication who fails to disclose direct and financially beneficial links to a product. Would this same author publish an article on the product showing poor performance?

Assessment of the effect on the outcome of a study with potential conflicts of interest should be left to the reader, not to the author or to the editor. Thus full disclosure is an integral part of the system of trust surrounding dental publications. Without full disclosure this trust will eventually be eroded to the point where cynicism wins—and the door will be locked.

Most journals have specific editorial policies regarding disclosure of any association that may raise concern about a conflict of interest. In *Quintessence International*, we ask for full disclosure of any connection, financial or otherwise, to a product that may be used or tested in a paper submitted for publication. This information, when disclosed, is then transmitted to the reader in the form of a footnote on the title page of the article.

In many cases, the fact that there is some affiliation with a particular product will not influence the results of a study. However, this conclusion should be left to the reader to assess. Bias is a part of life and to completely eliminate it from affecting any written material is impossible. We can only hope to minimize the effect of bias, publicize potential areas of conflict of interest, and let the open-minded reader make an informed decision. If we fail, the door will soon be locked, and we will all be losers.



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