



Reviewer bias or competitive harmful acts by reviewers

Case study 3

Source: Committee on Publication Ethics, [Case 01/39](#)

Referee with a conflict of interest

A paper was received by Journal A in August and sent to Dr X for comment. Dr X advised that the paper was not original in the light of a publication by his own research group earlier in the year in another journal, and that furthermore, this study contained over twice as many patients as the paper the journal had sent to him to referee. The journal decided to reject the paper on the strength of Dr X's report.

Two months later Dr X submitted a paper to Journal A on exactly the same research topic, based on a combination of patient data from several research centres, but giving a much larger sample size than either of the aforementioned papers. The journal decided to reject the paper, as it did not add enough to previously published research.

The journal editors thought that Dr X had a competing interest and that the authors of the paper submitted in August might have had cause for complaint had they known the referee was about to submit a related article to the same journal.

The journal requires referees to declare a financial conflict of interest and asks referees to consider declaring other competing interests, although this is voluntary. Dr X did not mention at the time he was refereeing for the journal that he was planning to submit a closely related competing article.

Should this be taken further?

Discussion/advice

- _ The referee should have declared his/her conflict of interest and declined to referee the paper.
- _ The editor should reconsider the paper, informing the authors that the referee had behaved badly by not stating his/her competing interest.

Outcome

The editor left, and nothing further was heard.