It’s in our interests not to be in conflict—of interest, that is

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Universal definitions of what constitutes COI are difficult to prescribe, but most institutions maintain their own sets of guidelines based on currently accepted opinion. Those for Journal of Applied Physiology can be found at http://www.the-aps.org/mm/Publications/Info-For-Authors/Ethical-Policies. When in doubt, an appropriate rule of thumb is to err on the side of caution (e.g., could anything possibly be construed in an unfavorable light by a local newspaper?). Once COI is declared, it becomes the responsibility of the editorial office to decide if a conflict is problematic. The important thing is to declare things up front. This is definitely NOT an area in which it is easier to ask for forgiveness than permission.

Conflict of interest can also easily arise for editors and reviewers when they are called upon to adjudicate on a manuscript that impinges upon their own area of research, as is usually the case. Publishing research work is part of the livelihood of a professional scientist, both in terms of money and prestige, so it is natural to see competitors as enemies and collaborators as allies. There is no way of getting around this entirely, because quality control in scientific research relies on critical review by expert peers, and these are the very people most likely to be conflicted.

There are, however, some COI situations that are obvious and must be avoided. Recent prior associations with an author, such as coauthorship on a manuscript or coinvestigator status on a grant, should be grounds for editors or reviewers to recuse themselves from the review process. What exactly constitutes “recent” in this regard is open to debate, but 5 years is probably a reasonable guideline in most cases; a longer duration may be required for highly formative relationships. Similarly, sentiments of loathing and/or contempt for an author also challenge objectivity and thus should be cause for editors or reviewers to consider recusing themselves.

Authors have a role to play here, too, because they are given the opportunity at submission time to suggest an Associate Editor to handle their manuscript, as well as up to four individuals to act as reviewers, and the above considerations apply to these choices as well. In particular, authors must avoid suggesting colleagues with whom they collaborate/publish, have studied under or mentored, or with whom they have a material financial relationship through patents or other ventures. The 5-yr rule is a guide here too, provided, of course, that the individuals involved can truly consider themselves to be at arm’s length after this period of time. Authors must understand that journal editors cannot know all of the potential author/editor/reviewer relationships, even in their own specific scientific community, and so must rely on author honesty. They must also understand that editors take this very seriously.

Again, there are no absolutes. Indeed, like all matters ethical, the definition of COI reflects the mores of society and thus is
in constant flux. Bottom line: when in doubt, declare or at least ask. As scientists, we can only aspire to be perfectly impartial stewards of the truth, but it is definitely in the interests of all that we not be viewed askance. As researchers, we bear a heavy burden in the name of integrity on behalf of the public. Avoiding, declaring, and managing COI goes a long way to lightening that load for us all.

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