

Conflicts of Interest

Policy and Procedure

Note: the content of this document is based on current NHMRC guidelines available online (December 2009)

Defining conflicts of interest

A conflict of interest refers to potentially competing obligations or influences to which a person is subject in the course of an activity or relationship. Conflicts of interest may be financial, personal or organisational. A conflict of interest does not imply inappropriate motivation or misconduct on the part of an individual.

Conflicts of interest most frequently arise from relationships or practices. Less commonly they may be the result of malign motivations of particular individuals.

A conflict of interest is a serious issue because it can compromise an individual as well as the activities of an organisation.

It is not possible to eliminate conflicts of interest in all situations. However, any possibility that they may arise, and any situation where they have arisen, must be identified. Steps should be taken to disclose conflicts of interest openly to control their impact.

Both perceived and actual conflicts of interest should be identified as individuals are often not in the best position to judge either whether there is a conflict, or, if there is, whether in the face of it they can still judge and act fairly and dispassionately. A perception that a conflict of interest exists can be as serious as an actual conflict, raising concerns about the integrity of individuals or the management practices of the organisation. For this reason, the possibility of a perceived conflict of interest must be treated as though the conflict exists.

Individual roles and responsibilities and organisational goals

For an organisation such as the Spinal Cord Injury Network, the most important consideration is the effect of a conflict of interest on decision processes and the outcomes that result. Network Directors, Committee Members and employees have a responsibility at any opportunity to disclose potential conflicts of interest that may influence, or be seen to influence, any aspect of the Network's operations. In terms of fundraising for the Network's activities, this responsibility extends to contacts with all potential and existing donors. In terms of awarding funds raised by the Spinal Cord Injury Network, the responsibility to disclose conflicts of interest extends to areas in which the Network's Committees work namely, facilitation of clinical trials, development of evidence-based practice, spinal cord injured people and research development. Responsibility to disclose conflicts extends to Network Directors, Committee Members and employees who are

investigators including clinical and research staff and involves publications, media reports, grant applications, and applications for appointment or promotion.

The most satisfactory means of managing conflicts of interest regarding an issue is for the individual to remove him or herself from any discussions, verbal and/or written, relating to that issue.

Procedures for declaration of conflicts of interest and their minimisation

No Network Director, Committee Member, or employee should adjudicate on an issue in which he or she has any conflict of interest, including any personal involvement or participation, financial interest in the outcome, or involvement in a competing activity to that under consideration.

It is the responsibility of the Chair of a meeting to decide whether disclosure of interests is sufficient or if it is appropriate an individual with a conflict of interest hears discussion without contributing or is excluded from discussion / the decision-making process.

Preferably, when an individual has a conflict of interest in relation to a matter under review, or could be seen to have a potential conflict of interest, that individual should withdraw from the meeting. The absence of the individual concerned should be recorded in the minutes. In addition, the individual should refrain from discussing the issue with other Network Members, or attempting to influence the situation in any way.

The Spinal Cord Injury Network keeps a register of declarations of interest.

This policy has been approved by the Spinal Cord Injury Network Board.