

## **ISEE Statement on Institutional Conflict of Interest**

Institutional conflicts of interest “arise when an institution’s own financial interests or those of its senior officials pose risks of undue influence on decisions involving the institution’s primary interests.”<sup>1</sup> In the context of environmental epidemiology, we assume that “the institution’s primary interests” are public health and advancement of science for achieving public health. Sources of institutional conflict of interest include:

- patents, equity positions and options held by institutions;
- patents, equity positions and options held by senior officials who make administrative decisions;
- service on boards or committees by senior officials who make administrative decisions;
- gifts to institutions from for-profit corporations, non-profit corporations, or individuals associated with such entities.
- funding from government agencies whose budgets may be influenced by lobbyists or campaign spending of for-profit corporations, non-profit corporations, or individuals associated with such entities.

As in the case of individual conflicts of interest, institutional conflicts should be defined as arising from the potential for influence rather than documented misconduct. Institutional conflicts may affect individual investigators’ choices of research topics, study designs, analyses, interpretations, job security, promotion, and access to institutional resources including laboratories, equipment, and research staff.

The funding base of research universities, for-profit and non-profit research corporations, and government agencies suggests that institutional conflicts are universal. Therefore, the issue is not whether institutions are conflicted, rather it is whether their conflicts are declared and open vs. denied and hidden. The American Association of University Professor’s [Statement on Corporate Funding of Academic Research](#) provides documentation of institutional conflicts and suggestions for avoiding them.

Some institutional conflicts are publicized – for example, major gifts, grants, naming of buildings or academic divisions – but unacknowledged as institutional conflicts in the interest of cultivating donations. In these cases individual epidemiologists can act responsibly by identifying the unstated conflicts. Other institutional conflicts are not public or may be difficult to document – for example, positions held by senior officials or influences of lobbyists or campaign contributions from organizations that are not required to report. Although practicing epidemiologists should not be expected to undertake their own investigations, they can act responsibly by recognizing institutional conflicts encountered in the course of their work, by making colleagues, students and the general public aware of the conflicts, and by participating in public discussion about the potential impacts of these conflicts on the conduct of science and the pursuit of public health. If epidemiologists are threatened or sanctioned for revealing

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<sup>1</sup> Committee on Conflict of Interest in Medical Research, Education, and Practice, Conflict of Interest in Medical Research, Education, and Practice. Bernard Lo and Marilyn J Field (eds) Institute of Medicine (US), Washington (DC): [National Academies Press \(US\)](#); 2009. ISBN-13: 978-0-309-13188-9

institutional conflicts of interest of their employer, they deserve the same protections as whistleblowers and should receive ISEE review, and, if appropriate, ISEE support.