

## Declaration of conflict of interest for reviewers in time of COVID-19 should be mandatory

Dear Editor,

We much appreciated the editorial by Sharma<sup>[1]</sup> showing the importance of the disclosure of conflict of interest (COI) in scientific research, particularly in the time of COVID-19. We agree that all the stakeholders of the publication process should be aware of the criticality of this major issue concerning publication ethics. This becomes more significant during this pandemic time, in which the research on COVID-19 could raise some ethical concerns. The body of COVID-19-related publications, which is massive and impressive,<sup>[2]</sup> the pressure and speed at which COVID-19 research is occurring, and the poor quality of the peer review process, which is often “questionable,”<sup>[3]</sup> may exacerbate the scientific fraud.<sup>[4]</sup> During this pandemic, the likelihood of honest error as well as of deliberate misconduct have been increasing. To date, the Retraction Watch website has published in its list 37 retractions, 3 temporarily retracted papers, and 3 expression of concerns.<sup>[5]</sup> In addition, many of the published papers are not peer-reviewed. A Reuters analysis of some of the most important servers (Google Scholar, *bioRxiv*, *medRxiv*, and *ChemRxiv*) indicated that 60% of studies are preprints, which are reporting nonpeer-reviewed information.<sup>[3]</sup> Certainly, much more attention should be paid by authors when they declare their disclosure of COIs on COVID-19-related publications, but we believe that COI should be mandatory for reviewers as well. Peer review process is the core of the scientific production process.<sup>[4]</sup> Some publishers, especially those supporting open peer review, during the peer review process, ask authors to declare their potential COI. Examples of competing interests include reimbursements, fees, funding, or salary received from an organization that may gain or lose financially from the publication of the manuscript, affairs concerning stocks or patents relating to the content of the manuscript or other financial or nonfinancial competing interests. In this time of COVID-19, other relevant competing interests could include any financial interests related to new drugs,

treatment and vaccines in the fight against COVID-19. It is crucial, therefore, reviewers refrain from being politicized or polarized and strive toward scientific rigor in terms of correct methodology and veracity of findings. Reviewers should also be vigilant in identifying dishonest practices and flawed interpretations by unethical researchers.<sup>[6]</sup> Unfortunately, reviewer's COI declaration is not required by all the scholarly journals. In most of the cases, however, peer reviewers could hiding behind the “blind” peer review not to declare their potential COI, which is detrimental to publication ethics and effectiveness of the scientific work.

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### Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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