

Ethical quandaries posing as conflicts of interest

Kottow, Miguel

Conflicts of interest are receiving increased attention in medical research, clinical practice and education. Criticism of, and penalties for, conflicts of interest have been insufficiently discussed and have been applied without adequate conceptual backing. Genuine conflicts of interest are situations in which alternative courses of action are ethically equivalent, decision-making being less a matter of moral deliberation than of personal weighing of interest. In contrast, situations usually thought of as conflicts of interest are mostly temptations to follow an attractive but undue option that causes harm by failing to uphold well-entrenched ethical standards. Examples of moral quandaries that pose as ethically neutral conflicts of interest are healthcare providers enticed to favour certain products; patients being referred to non-therapeutic trials entailing risks and non-optimal healthcare; industry-supported scientists failing to deliver unbiased research results and reports or pa