

The Fire of the Week: Managing Conflicts of Interest

Emilie Gunn

People sometimes ask me what I do, and I find this a challenging question to answer. In some ways, the answer is simple. As managing editor of an oncology journal, I oversee the functioning of that journal, help chart the course for its success, and ensure that all systems are running as efficiently as possible. But when pressed to explain what I do on a day-to-day basis (i.e., what specific tasks I perform), the answer becomes more complicated.

This is because each day is different, and like many of us, I am frequently confronted with problems that leave me wondering how to handle them. Unfortunately, these are often the same challenges that demand my attention RIGHT NOW. In my organization, we call these “drive bys,” which occur when someone walks into your office (or sends an email), asking for your immediate attention on an urgent problem. Some organizations also refer to them as “fire drills.”

When faced with these unique situations we have not seen previously, we may consider our options. We may ask ourselves, “Do I know anyone who may have seen this situation before?”; “Have I handled something similar in the past?”; or of course, “What would [PERSON'S NAME] do?” We may tap into our personal network or turn to others in our organization. As CSE members, we may send the question to the listserv to see if anyone has words of wisdom for us.

What is most important in these fire drills is not having all the answers, but rather having the resources to find them. With that in mind, this issue of *Science Editor* introduces a new column titled “Fire of the Week.” This column offers a place to share those situations that leave you scratching your head, thinking, “Well, I’ve never heard that one before.” Collective wisdom is powerful, and chances are, if you have experienced what you think is a unique situation, someone else has too. Why not share your experience so we all can benefit?

We want to hear from you. If you have recently encountered a particularly challenging or unusual situation, please tell us about it! To encourage submissions, we will even give you a handy template to follow.

I’ll go first.

EMILIE GUNN is education editor for *Science Editor* and managing editor for *Journal of Clinical Oncology* and *Journal of Global Oncology*.

Describe the “Fire.” What Happened? Who Was Involved? How Did the Situation Arise?

In 2015, our organization selected a founding editor in chief for a new journal. His selection came after a long, thorough search and interview process during which a committee of staff and members of our board of directors evaluated 10 applicants. The final selection was clearly the best choice for the job. The new editor gladly accepted the appointment. Unfortunately, as we prepared to make a public announcement of the editor’s appointment, a member of the marketing team discovered this editor had some commercial interests that, while not strictly a conflict of interest given the subject matter of this journal, may be perceived as such.

Where Did You Go/What Resources Did You Utilize to Arrive at a Solution?

We quickly conferred with our in-house legal team, who presented a range of suggestions.

What Possibilities Did You Consider? Why Did You Decide Against Those?

We could offer the position to the runner-up applicant. We were not in favor of this, as we felt the candidate we already selected was the ideal choice. Another option was to ask the new editor to mitigate the appearance of conflict of interest by severing ties with the companies in question. Again, we felt this was not the best course of action, as the editor held significant interest in these companies and felt firmly dedicated to their success. The final suggestion was to offer him a shorter term than originally planned (2 years instead of 3), with no option for renewal. While this did not negate the conflict, it did reduce the amount of time the editor would be in control of the journal content.

How Did You Resolve the Problem? What Was the Outcome?

Ultimately, we went with the last option. This obviated the need to restart the editor search and allowed our first-choice candidate to assume the role of editor in chief. The only drawback was that it meant we would need to begin looking for the next editor in chief sooner than planned.

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Will You Change Any of Your Policies or Day-to-Day Procedures Based on This Occurrence?

This situation, while difficult, has informed our process for subsequent editor searches. We now incorporate a

thorough check into any potential conflicts of interest into a much earlier stage in the search process. This allows us to consider other applicants if needed, and not find out when it is too late that our top choice may not be the ideal choice.