

Our conflict of interest policy for peer reviewers

It is a fundamental principle of charity law that trustees should not be in a position where their personal interests and their duty to the charity conflict. This applies to potential conflicts just as much as actual ones and should apply to any committee empowered to make decisions or recommendations on behalf of the trustees.

The UK's Association of Medical Research Charities (AMRC), of which Worldwide Cancer Research is a member, provides advice on how their members should carry out peer review of applications for funding. This includes the following principles:

- a) Decisions should be impartial and members should not participate in discussions where they, or anyone in their department, could be a beneficiary.
- b) Peer review should be accountable and the methods and procedures used by the charity to make decisions should be published.

Worldwide Cancer Research has adopted a policy that goes beyond these principles; we have been guided more by how the situation might appear to a third party. Our ruling principle is that if there is a circumstance that could cause another person to think the opinion of a peer reviewer on a grant application might be inappropriately influenced, that peer reviewer should declare an interest and withdraw from any review or discussion of that application.

Based on this principle, the following circumstances are considered sufficient for a peer reviewer to declare a conflict of interest and withdraw:

- a) If the peer reviewer is named as a principal investigator, co-investigator or collaborator on the proposed project.
- b) If the peer reviewer is a relative or close friend of the principal investigator, one of the co-investigators or collaborators or named research staff.
- c) If, during the last 5 years, the peer reviewer has collaborated or published with the principal investigator, one of the coinvestigators or named research staff (but not the collaborators).
- d) If the peer reviewer currently holds, or is applying for, any grants or patents with the principal investigator, one of the coinvestigators or named research staff (but not the collaborators).
- e) If, at any time, the principal investigator, one of the co-investigators or named research staff (but not the collaborators) has worked in the peer reviewer's laboratory, or vice versa.
- f) If, currently, the peer reviewer would be reasonably regarded as one of the main competitors of the principal investigator or one of the co-investigators (but not the collaborators).
- g) If the peer reviewer is currently employed by, or holds a position of influence at, the same institution as the principal investigator or one of the co-investigators (but not the collaborators) on an application.

- h) If, during the last 5 years, the peer reviewer has worked at the same institution as the principal investigator, or one of the co-investigators or named research staff (but not the collaborators) on an application.

Many of these criteria should be applied with a measure of judgement, taking into consideration factors such as the number of authors of a paper, a person's role in the application, how long ago it was and whether they worked in parts of the institution where they were likely to come into contact with each other.

The above list is not exclusive and there may be other circumstances in which the ruling principle would apply and peer reviewers should declare an interest. In addition, peer reviewers may choose to declare an interest if they feel that it would enable them to avoid being put in a difficult position by a third party.

Worldwide Cancer Research will screen applications for any apparent conflicts of interest and block individual peer reviewers from accessing those applications where they are identified. However, not all of these conflicts of interest are obvious and peer reviewers must inform Worldwide Cancer Research immediately if they become aware of any conflicts.