

OPEN LETTER TO:

- Stefania Boccia and Carlo La Vecchia, Editors-in-Chief, *Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Public Health*
- Executive Editors and Consulting Editors, *Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Public Health*
- Founding Editors, Walter Ricciardi and Giovanni Corrao

July 17, 2015

We wish to submit a complaint regarding the failure to disclose conflicting interests in the article “Critical reappraisal of Balangero chrysotile and mesothelioma risk” by Edward B. Ilgren, Frederick D. Pooley, Yumi M. Kumiya and John A. Hoskins, published in *Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Public Health* - 2015, Vol. 12, Number 1.

Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Public Health states that it is of great importance that conflicts of interest and the appearance of conflicts of interest be avoided in the process of accepting submitted papers and specifically requires that: “All submissions must include disclosure of all relationships that could be viewed as presenting a potential conflict of interest.”

As the official journal of the Italian Society of Medical Statistics and Clinical Epidemiology, *Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Public Health* should, we believe, act as a leader in upholding the highest standards of ethical integrity.

The article “Critical reappraisal of Balangero chrysotile and mesothelioma risk”, however, included no Conflict of Interest Statement by the authors, despite extensive evidence for significant conflict of interest involving all the authors.

- In July 2014, Pooley testified as an expert witness on behalf of Union Carbide Company in asbestos litigation regarding harm caused by chrysotile asbestos. In this court case Pooley confirmed that he has testified in asbestos-related personal injury litigation on behalf of Lorillard, U.S. Gypsum, Bethlehem Steel and other companies that he could not remember and that over a 30 to 40 year period, he has testified on behalf of defendant companies a hundred to two hundred times.
- Hoskins receives financing from asbestos industry organisations to travel the world promoting the use of chrysotile asbestos and carries out political lobbying activities on behalf of the asbestos industry.
- Ilgren, Hoskins and Kumiya, together with the consulting company RJ Lee Group, were involved in a project claiming that high levels of exposure to crocidolite asbestos caused no harm to workers in Bolivia.

None of these Conflicts of Interest were declared in the article.

We note that the date of acceptance of the article is given (November 14, 2014) without the submission date of the article.

We note as well that the authors express their “extreme thanks” to the joint Editor-in-Chief of the journal, Carlo La Vecchia, for his assistance in the development of the article. No COI statement was provided for La Vecchia, who was earlier this year required, as a consequence of a complaint made to the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), to publish an Erratum in the European Journal of Cancer Prevention (of which he was also an associate editor) disclosing his asbestos COI regarding his article denying harm of continuing exposure to asbestos.

We wish to point out that COPE recommends in its Code of Conduct that journals publish a list of relevant interests (financial, academic and other kinds) of all editorial staff and members of editorial boards.

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors states that participants in peer review and publication should disclose their conflicting interests, and the information should be made available so that others can judge their effects for themselves.

In light of the foregoing facts, we request that:

- *Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Public Health* publish a Conflict of Interest Statement for each of the authors of the article, “Critical reappraisal of Balangero chrysotile and mesothelioma risk” and also publish the submission date of the article.
- *Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Public Health* adopt and implement a clear policy requiring that Conflict of Interest Statements for each author and anyone involved in the development of an article be included in all published articles.
- *Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Public Health* adopt and implement a clear policy requiring Conflict of Interest Statements be published on its website by its editorial staff and members of its editorial boards.
- The Italian Society of Medical Statistics and Clinical Epidemiology adopt and implement a clear policy requiring Conflict of Interest Statements be published on its website by its board members, as is the practice of COPE (<http://publicationethics.org/about/council>) and the International Joint Policy Committee of Societies of Epidemiology (<http://www.ijpc-se.org/about.php>).
- Peer reviewers be required to provide a Conflict of Interest Statement and that they not participate in reviewing any article when they have potential conflicting interests.
- *Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Public Health* join the more than 7,000 journals that are members of COPE.
- The Italian Society of Medical Statistics and Clinical Epidemiology and *Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Public Health* take urgent action via an open and transparent process, such as holding a working conference or some other

mechanism, in order to put in place clear and effective ethical standards for both the organisation and the journal, including Conflict of Interest Disclosure Requirements, modelled on the work that has already been carried out by COPE and ICMJE.

- *Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Public Health* adopt a policy to exercise particular vigilance with regard to submissions from authors who carry out industry-financed work that puts forward conclusions that serve the industry's interests and that go against the findings of independent scientists and reputable scientific agencies.

We request that you give our concerns and requests thorough attention and we would be glad to provide additional information. We believe that it is important that these important issues be discussed in a transparent and serious manner and we would be glad to participate in discussions with you.

Sincerely,

Francesco Forastiere, Dipartimento Epidemiologia Regione Lazio, Rome

Roberta Pirastu, Sapienza Rome University

Pietro Comba, Istituto Superiore di Sanità, Rome

Maria Angela Vigotti, Università di Pisa, Pisa

Elisabetta Chellini, MD, Unit of Occupational & Environmental Epidemiology, Cancer Research & Prevention Institute (ISPO) Florence

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T K Joshi, FRCS, FFOM, Director, OEM Programme, Centre for Occupational and Environmental Health, New Delhi; Fellow, Collegium Ramazzini, Italy; Visiting Professor, Drexel University School of Public Health, Philadelphia, USA

Arthur L. Frank, MD, PhD, Professor of Public Health, Drexel University School of Public Health, Philadelphia, PA, USA. Fellow, Collegium Ramazzini, Italy

Colin L. Soskolne, Professor Emeritus, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, Canada; Adjunct Professor [July 1, 2013 - June 30, 2016], Faculty of Health, University of

Canberra, Australia; Chair, International Joint Policy Committee of the Societies of Epidemiology (IJPC-SE); Fellow, Collegium Ramazzini, Italy

Annie Thébaud Mony, directrice de recherche honoraire à l'INSERM
IRIS/GISCOP93, Université Paris-13, France

Sanjay Chaturvedi, MD, FAMS, FIPHA, FIAPSM, Professor and Head, Department of Community Medicine, University College of Medical Sciences, Delhi, India

Morris Greenberg, MB, FRCP, FFOM, former, HM Medical Inspector of Factories, UK;
Fellow, Collegium Ramazzini, Italy

Fernand Turcotte, MD, MPH, FRCPC, Professeur émérite de santé publique, Faculté de médecine, Université Laval, Québec, Canada

Hans-Joachim Weitowitz, MD, Professor emeritus; Former Director, Institute and Outpatient Clinic of Occupational and Social Medicine, University of Giessen, Germany

Rolf Petersen, Consultant PhD, Department of Occupational Medicine. Slagelse Hospital, Denmark

Richard A. Lemen, Ph.D., MSPH, Assistant Surgeon General, USPHS (retired); Adjunct Professor, Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University; Fellow, Collegium Ramazzini, Italy

Leslie London, Director, School of Public Health and Family Medicine, University of Cape Town Health Sciences Faculty, South Africa

Vilma Sousa Santana, M.D, PhD in Epidemiology, Professor, Institute of Collective Health, Federal University of Bahia; Coordinator, Program for Environmental and Workers' Health, Brazil

Mohamed F. Jeebhay, MBChB, MPH (Occ Med), PhD, Head of Department and Director, School of Public Health and Family Medicine, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Cape Town, South Africa

Xaver Baur, Charite University Medicine; Fellow, Collegium Ramazzini, Italy;
European Society for Environmental and Occupational Medicine, EOM Society.org, Germany

Lygia T. Budnik, University of Hamburg, European Society for Environmental and Occupational Medicine, Berlin, Germany

*Kathleen Ruff, senior human rights adviser, Rideau Institute, Ottawa, Canada; founding director, human rights website, RightOnCanada.ca

Notes:

Titles and affiliations are given for identification purposes only.

*Please send responses to Kathleen Ruff, kruff@bulkley.net.

Conflict of Interest Statement:

Roberta Pirastu, Maria Angela Vigotti, Guadalupe Madrid, Cuauhtémoc Pérez, Fernand Turcotte, Morris Greenberg, Lennart Hardell, T. Joshi, Rolf Petersen, Sanjay Chaturvedi, Leslie London, Annie Thébaud-Mony, Vilma Santanta, Mohamed Jeebhay, Lygia Buknik and Kathleen Ruff have no conflict of interest to declare. Elisabetta Chellini and Pietro Comba have served as a consultant for the Prosecutor in some criminal trials concerning asbestos and other environmental carcinogens. Francesco Forastiere has served as an expert witness for the Court in a trial for asbestos related mesotheliomas and has served as expert for the Judge in trials involving environmental contamination and occupational exposures. Prof Weitowitz has testified on behalf of plaintiffs in asbestos litigation cases in German Social Courts lawsuits. Xaver Bauer has testified in occupational diseases litigation on behalf of plaintiffs and provides independent expert opinions for social courts or statutory insurances. Richard Lemen and Arthur Frank have been involved in asbestos litigation and serve as Co-Science Advisors to the Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization. Colin Soskolne has served as an expert witness between 2011 and 2013 on asbestos cases for plaintiff attorneys; all fees were donated to the University of Alberta.

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