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PII: S0895-4356(19)30556-6

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclinepi.2019.12.014>

Reference: JCE 10038

To appear in: *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology*

Received Date: 17 June 2019

Revised Date: 5 November 2019

Accepted Date: 13 December 2019

Please cite this article as: Grundy Q, Mayes C, Holloway K, Mazzarello S, Thombs BD, Bero L, Conflict of interest as ethical shorthand: Understanding the range and nature of “non-financial conflict of interest” in biomedicine, *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology* (2020), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclinepi.2019.12.014>.

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**Conflict of interest as ethical shorthand: Understanding the range and nature of “non-financial conflict of interest” in biomedicine**

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**Funding:** QG was supported by a Canadian Institutes of Health Research Postdoctoral Fellowship. KH is supported by a postdoctoral fellowship through the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. BDT was supported by a Fonds de Recherche Québec - Santé researcher award. This work was supported in part by NHMRC project grant APP1139997. The funders had no role in the study design, collection, analysis, or interpretation of data, or the decision to submit the article for publication.

**Conflicts of interest:** The authors have no conflicts of interest.

**CRedit Author Statement:** QG and LB conceptualised and designed the study; QG and SM conducted data collection; QG, CM, KH, SM, BT and LB performed formal analysis; QG drafted the manuscript and CM, KH, SM, BT and LB provided critical revision.

### Abstract

**Objective:** To identify the range of issues labelled as “non-financial conflicts of interest” in biomedicine, articulate the associated concerns, and analyse the implications of defining these issues as conflicts of interest.

**Study design and setting:** A qualitative study triangulating data from three purposively sampled sources: 1) literature, 2) policies; and 3) interviews. Participants were corresponding authors of sampled literature (December 2017 - January 2019). A critical, interpretive approach served as the analytic strategy.

**Results:** 99 articles provided the sampling frame; we recruited 16 participants and sampled 20 policies. Participants labelled a wide range of personal attributes, social relationships, professional experiences, intellectual endeavours, and financial interests as “non-financial conflicts of interest.” Despite a lack of consensus regarding the nature of the problem, many “non-financial” interests are currently subject to policy action. The term serves as ethical shorthand to describe the ways that 1) “strong beliefs”; 2) “pre-determined views”; 3) experiences; and 4) relationships shape evidence-led processes.

**Conclusion:** Expansion of the definition of conflict of interest to include non-financial interests may have unintended consequences including exclusion of diverse perspectives. Problems labelled “non-financial conflicts of interest” should be defined in terms of what they are rather than what they are not (i.e. “non”-financial). We suggest instead, preventing financial conflicts of interest and ensuring inclusive and equitable representation within evidence-based processes.

**Keywords:** conflict of interest, non-financial interests, disclosure, qualitative methods, clinical guidelines, systematic reviews

**Running title:** Conflict of interest as ethical shorthand