

## **Conflict of Interest, Bias and Advocacy: Definitions and Statements**

**Conflict of interest** (COI) is a situation. If the role of a person in a process presents potential for him/her to serve a self interest via a financial relationship, professional collaboration, or professional competition, it is a COI. Employment by a particular corporation, university, governmental or nongovernmental organization does not inherently present COI. Likewise, collaboration or competition does not inherently present COI. Institutes, foundations and other organizations that provide research support and/or inform public policy typically specify situations that present COI for peer reviewers. COI exists if the personal interest of a scientist such as job security, research agenda, or benefit to their employer impairs objectivity in evaluation of an issue. When possible, it is advisable to avoid situations that present potential or real COI. This is not always possible, however. Appropriate response to a situation that presents COI can avoid a substantive problem. Disclosure of COI is always necessary. When representing the Society of Toxicology, and thereby the public good, it is necessary to abstain from influencing decisions when a COI exists.

**Bias** is a perspective. It is a condition (conceptual framework) under which a person operates that influences interpretation and presentation of information. Bias is universal and reflects a person's world view and values. It can prevent impartial consideration of an issue. People often perceive bias in others. This outlook can contribute to contention in a decision process. Acknowledging bias and remaining conscious of it is a public obligation of scientists. In a decision making process, it is necessary to manage bias to assure objective consideration of issues. Peer review is a traditional and proven means of managing bias. Through this process, individual, personal and institutional values may emerge that the peer review group evaluates in the context of alternative views in reaching consensus. Assuring a balance of perspectives among peer reviewers and scientific advisors who are informing decision makers is one means of such management.

**Advocacy** is recommending or supporting a particular course of action or policy. An advocate's commitment to a particular policy decision is sometimes not stated. An advocate may disguise lack of objectivity by selective interpretation and presentation of scientific information that supports a particular policy decision. At times, advocates for a public policy decision allege bias against scientists presenting views that support an alternative decision. Clear distinction between science and other factors influencing

public policy, such as values, are critical in these situations. Peer review of science informing public policy is the appropriate means for balancing contention between advocates. The political process ultimately determines public policy. The general public and decision makers deserve application of relevant and objective science to public policy. Considering and presenting alternative explanations for information is a responsibility of scientists informing public policy. At times the interests of different parties result in conflict over public policy decisions. Each side of the issue is entitled to an advocate that presents arguments to a third party decision maker. When members of the Society of Toxicology play the role of an advocate, they are responsible to disclose who or what they represent.