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Supplements used to advantage

A recent (January 2010) editorial in The Lancet addressing the ‘perils of journal and supplement publishing’ states in no unclear terms that the publishing of commercially sponsored supplements is ‘firmly off the agenda’ for The Lancet (1). The editorial notes that although supplements and custom publications are an established element in journal publishing, supplemental material ‘is usually much inferior to that of any parent title’ and is generally problematic for editors and reviewers. On this note, The Lancet goes on to identify examples of commercial supplement publications that support this view, including a recent example that had fallen into their own hands.

The Lancet is not the only entity to address custom publications this winter. Elsevier, the publisher behind The Lancet, found itself at the center of controversy and criticism in 2009 when it was revealed that a custom publication was sponsored by a pharmaceutical company without this information being disclosed to readers. In the wake of this incident, Elsevier chose to review its internal policies and procedures for custom and sponsored publications, leading to both an introduction of new and practical elements to these and to a decision to make these policies and procedures public (see announcement). These actions recognized the increasing demand for transparency that is being heard throughout the scholarly communications arena.

Debate over supplemental materials, invited articles and custom publications rises occasionally in scientific publishing, particularly in bio-medical fields. At the heart of most criticism is a concern over whether our usual mechanisms of quality control – in particular, stringent peer review – have been foregone in the interests of attaining financial gain. Moreover, and following from this, questions arise about publications that have not been subjected to critical review but are being presented as scientifically rigorous alongside other publications that have been. In short, are we being duped into trusting an article that reports positively on a drug because the company that developed and/or produces that drug has paid a high enough fee to a journal or communications company to publish the material in – or as supplemental material to – an otherwise esteemed journal?

Unlike The Lancet, Global Health Action has deliberately and firmly placed supplemental publications on its agenda, welcoming Supplements to and Themed Clusters of Papers in the journal. Though a fairly new journal, we have already published two supplements (2, 3) and a thematic cluster of articles (4), and at least two more supplements and a thematic cluster are pending for publication in 2010. The editors and the publisher not only welcome supplemental publications but actively pursue and develop such content as we regard this to be in line with the aims of the journal, not least of which is its intent to publish the critical results of research being conducted by colleagues in developing countries who are often disadvantaged in terms of publishing. We also firmly believe that thematic series of papers may serve research training purposes for young researchers from developing countries and foster collaborative networking in research across cultures and disciplines. We can further this aim by being attuned to key projects that are being carried out in such settings, to issues that urgently need to be addressed, and to gaps in knowledge that need to be filled, through offering a publication outlet for these, while also maintaining usual quality standards.

The special publication of a cluster of articles addressing climate change and global health in conjunction with the COP 15 climate meeting that was held in Copenhagen last December is an example of our efforts in this area (4). As the climate debate raged on, few voices were addressing the urgent question of what impact changes in global climate might have upon the health of people across the globe. In response, Global Health Action invited two well-respected and internationally recognized researchers to edit a cluster of papers on this subject and to help us to recruit researchers to submit manuscripts on the topic. The result was a highly interesting collection of articles which – apart from being published online – was also printed in 600 copies as a Special Volume for distribution to key players at COP 15. These articles have been read by visitors in over 170 countries who have downloaded the complete collection (24 articles) some 2,300 times, in addition to thousands of individual papers as single items. The print publication of these articles was sponsored by the Umeå Centre for Global Health Research, one of the partners behind Global Health Action.

To date, the supplements published in Global Health Action have received different forms of sponsorship, though none of this has been from the industry or others with commercial vested interests. To the contrary, sponsorship has largely come from governmental and non-profit entities that appreciate the work we are striving to carry out, including the Wellcome Trust, Sida/GLOBFORSK, Rockefeller Foundation, Gates Foundation, the Hewlett Foundation, the Centre for Global Health Research at Umeå University, Sweden, and the Norwegian organizers behind the abstract supplement from the Second Conference on Global Health Research (2).

We agree with Elsevier that the routines and guidelines behind supplemental or custom publications should be as transparent as possible. As noted above, all materials
published as regular, invited or supplemental material to *Global Health Action* are submitted to our regular peer review process involving at least two independent reviewers, using a single blind process (i.e. the reviewers’ identities remain unknown to the authors). Some published works are also developed, prior to peer review, through our mentor program. This mentor program was developed on the basis of the editorial team’s and the publisher’s commitment to seek important research results from all areas of the globe on global health, while also ensuring high-quality content. The mentor program is aimed at lifting the quality of scientific writing and presentation of results by young or inexperienced researchers. A core group of high-ranking, dedicated researchers have volunteered to occasionally work with authors who have submitted manuscripts that are highly promising, but which require some additional work to bring the article in line with the journal’s expectations and international standards. An example of such mentorship is the 2009 supplement *Risk factors for chronic non-communicable disease: the burden in Asian INDEPTH Health and Demographic Surveillance Sites* (3) for which Professor Ruth Bonita served as mentor for many of the authors.

To summarize, *Global Health Action’s* perspective on supplemental materials is quite different from that of *The Lancet*; supplemental materials can be of both high quality and help a journal fulfill its stated mission. Readers can be assured that all articles and reports published in *Global Health Action* have been and will be subjected to regular peer review and that any external funding that has been used to support the publication of additional materials will be specified.

Stig Wall and Peter Byass, Editors
Anne Bindslev and Caroline Sutton, Publishers

References