

Guidance from the RCVS Ethics Review Panel (ERP) on the restrictions to publication of clinical veterinary research findings

Clinical veterinary research is particularly reliant on the support, sponsorship and funding provided by commercial organisations, including pharmaceutical companies; pet food manufacturers; pet health insurance companies; major employer groups of veterinary surgeons and others. Such funding benefits patients, individual veterinary researchers, the wider veterinary community as well as the commercial organisations themselves. It is to be much welcomed and encouraged.

However, there are substantial conflicts of interest which must be acknowledged and understood so that they can be properly managed. All company directors owe a legal fiduciary duty to their shareholders, that is to prioritise a company's interests. For example, the publication of the findings of a clinical research project might cast one of the company's products in an unflattering light and could therefore produce an ethical conflict. This is potentially problematic because the duty of researchers is to publish their findings regardless of outcome, whereas companies may instead want to suppress potentially disadvantageous information.

Many of the major employer groups and grant awarding agencies operating in the UK and in the EU in both medical and veterinary sectors have a written policy on scientific and research engagement that includes a declaration that employees and recipients of funding will be free to publish their findings regardless of the nature of the outcomes. This is ultimately important so that any benefits to human and animal health and welfare can be implemented and that any harms can be minimised. In the long run transparency, honesty and integrity are essential for public confidence and reputation interests in business, in research, in medicine and in this case in the veterinary profession and in clinical veterinary research. Many companies have internal reviews prior to publication as it is in their best and long-term interests; a later revelation that publication or some detail was suppressed in some way would benefit no-one. In any event, it would be a matter of professional courtesy that researchers inform their sponsors of any publication or communication and give them a chance to comment.

An example of a company policy that the RCVS ERP supports can be found on the [Mars website](#). Extracts of which are as follows:

- *All scientific research and engagement activities involving partnerships with third parties (such as universities) are approached with trust, transparency and respect. Any unrestricted grants, donations, gifts, or in-kind contributions provided in support of external research are declared in all applicable research communications, publications and presentations.*
- *Mars supports the right of scientific collaborators to freely publish research findings regardless of the nature of the outcomes. When Mars scientists author or co-author scientific publications and presentations, they are expected to fulfil established criteria for authorship*

and adhere to all standards that govern transparency and the declaration of potential conflicts of interest.

- *Where Mars indirectly supports external research via trade associations or industry organizations, this must be declared in applicable research communications, publications and presentations. All organizations with which we engage must follow the spirit of this policy, be transparent in disclosure of its funding sources, and ensure that funding is not linked to achievement of a specific research outcome.*

We would advise you that the ERP will not accept a blanket veto on publication and if a sponsor has some reservations, then these should be resolved before asking for ethics approval. Alternatively, advice from the RCVS ERP can be sought in difficult situations. Applicants should be aware that this principle on publication restrictions might also apply to other forms of sponsorship such as free products, subsidised treatments, and diagnostic and laboratory tests. It might also apply to any embargo on publication.