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## LETTERS

## TACKLING CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

**BMJ tackles FDA's mote in eye while ignoring own beam**Stephen Senn *professor of statistics*

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Godlee implies that the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) should be blamed for reversing its decision when it realises it has made a mistake.<sup>1</sup> Only two months ago an FDA panel voted to withdraw the breast cancer drug bevacizumab, which had been given "accelerated approval" in 2008.<sup>2</sup> Fast track approval: is that foreign to the medical press? Well, 'pon my soul, what did I find here <http://resources.bmj.com/bmj/authors/fast-track-publication>? Publishing faulty and mistaken articles: is that something that the *BMJ* never does? Leaving a job to take up a commercial post: is that something that only regulators do, or journal editors also? Perhaps the editor of the *BMJ* might like to engage in a little local historical reflection. So what are the real differences between the FDA and the *BMJ*? I can think of at least two.

Firstly, the agency, unlike the journal, requires you to submit your data files and your computer code with your application so that the agency statisticians can spend weeks and months checking your claims.

Secondly, the FDA does, indeed, reverse its decisions. On the other hand, I seem to recall a particular editor admitting, "half

of what we publish is wrong; the problem is we don't know which half," to which might be added, "but when we do know it's wrong we certainly don't withdraw it."

Compared with what the FDA does to ensure quality, the *BMJ* is not even at square one. Instead of a policy of "original data if you think it will help our reviewers or if we specifically request it," why doesn't the journal say, "no data and computer code, no *BMJ* article." Instead of criticising the FDA, the *BMJ* would do well to learn from it.

Competing interests: SS consults regularly for the pharmaceutical industry. As an academic his career is furthered by publishing. A full declaration of his interests is maintained at [www.senns.demon.co.uk/Declaration\\_Interest.htm](http://www.senns.demon.co.uk/Declaration_Interest.htm).

- 1 Godlee F. Turning the tide on conflicts of interest [Editor's choice]. *BMJ* 2011;343:d5147. (10 August.)
- 2 Lenzner J. FDA committee votes to withdraw bevacizumab for breast cancer. *BMJ* 2011;343:d4244. (5 July.)

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