Letters

gies.

stem cell research and may very well be

rules outlined above are specific to

or divestment of conflicting interests

through strategies such as disclosure

fights of interest in advisory committees

was severely criticized following the ex-

clusion of stem cell scientists and fertil-

ity experts from the agency’s recently

constituted board. Likewise, the Cana-

dian Institutes of Health Research ex-

clude researchers affiliated with Cana-

dia’s Stem Cell Network from membership in the Stem Cell Oversight

Committee, the national stem cell re-

search ethics board.

This move toward a more restrictive

regulatory regime is different from the

approach used in other jurisdictions. For example, in California, stem cell re-

search oversight committees can in-

clude members with relevant expertise. Similarly, fertility clinicians and human

embryonic stem cell research scientists are allowed to be members of the Hu-

man Embryology and Fertilisation Au-

thority, the body responsible for over-

seeing embryo research in the United

Kingdom. A recent study of UK fertility

clinic patients found “overwhelming

support for doctors to be the most im-

portant members of the Authority, fol-

lowed by researchers working in the area.” Both jurisdictions manage con-

flicts of interest in advisory committees through strategies such as disclosure or divestment of conflicting interests and exclusion of experts from commit-
tee leadership roles.

It could be argued that the Canadian

rules outlined above are specific to stem cell research and may vary well be

the result of Canadians’ desire for strict

regulation of emerging biotechnolo-
gies. However, conflicts of interest in stem cell research committees have not been shown to be qualitatively different from those in other scientific advisory and oversight contexts. Until there is such evidence to the contrary, the policy response to conflicts of interest should focus on addressing the need for specific expertise on these commit-
tees with effective management strate-
gies, such as disclosure and divestment of financial interests.

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Competing interests: None declared.

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DOI:10.1503/cmaj.1070077

Is primary care a lost cause?

The difficulty in attracting graduating physicians to family practice that Wayne Kondro described in a recent CMAJ news piece 1 is a worldwide phe-
nomenon. In 1987, 31% of German medical students wanted to become family physicians, whereas in 1995 only 9% of medical students at the University of Göttingen made this career choice; in 2006 fewer than 4% of medical students at the University of Leipzig chose family medicine. Among the many factors influencing specialty choice, one that can be easily altered to improve the appeal of family medicine to students is the set of state or professional regulations that govern the process of qualifying to become a general practitioner. In most parts of Europe it takes 3 years of training to qualify for a general practice licence. However, in Germany there have been 3 different routes to licensure for general practitioners over the past decade, requiring training periods ranging from 3 to 5 years. This lack of

consistency has had dramatic conse-
quences in terms of shortages of family physicians; young physicians have been deterred from entering family practice in Germany because of the uncertainty associated with frequent changes in the regulations governing the clinical training periods and seminars on medical theory that are required to obtain licensure as a family physician.

Postgraduate education and the routes to licensure for family practi-
tioners have been reformed almost continuously over the past decade in Germany in the spirit of quality improve-
ment. However, when access to training in general practice was re-
stricted in Germany at one point, a se-
vere shortage of family physicians re-
sulted. Many young Germans chose an alternative medical career (e.g., in general internal medicine) or went to countries with more relaxed and stable regulations, such as Switzerland and Australia.

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Competing interests: None declared.

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Sleepy older drivers

Norman Wolkove and colleagues recently presented an excellent review of sleep disorders in older people. However, they did not mention that one of the main symptoms of sleep disorders, excessive daytime sleepiness, increases the risk of automobile accidents. Primary caregivers should be aware that