

## Editorial

### **Some turmoil in the editorial scenarios in medical journals**

*Sri Lanka Journal of Child Health*, 2016; 45(2): 61-62

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4038/sljch.v45i2.8114>

(Key words: Turmoil, editorial scenario, medical journal)

It is an accepted and incontrovertible adage that the editor of a medical journal holds a singularly prestigious position. He or she has the privileged task of publishing the journal and ensuring the academic value of the material that is published. It is undoubtedly an essential quality of a good journal that it conforms to accepted international publishing standards and the editor has a duty to try and comply with such requirements. The editor also has the final, accountable and onerous responsibility of ensuring, to the best of his or her ability, the veracity of information that goes into the published public record. He or she would be the ultimate person with whom the buck stops.

Most definitely, although it is such a respected position, the responsibilities of the said posting too are quite a few in numbers. There are very many qualities that are routinely anticipated in a medical editor. Amongst all the standard things that are expected as a *sine qua non* of an ideal medical editor, honesty and integrity rank quite high. Yet for all that and most unfortunately, there are documented instances of medical journal editors contravening these lofty ideals. Admittedly and thankfully, they are extremely few and far between. The very vast majority of editors of medical journals have lived up to the reputation of persons of impeccable honesty, integrity and possessing an undeterred quest towards all that is expected of a person holding such an eminent position. Any deviations, however minor, from these traditional and much revered mandatory requirements would necessarily lead to justifiable deterrent and punitive reactions. There is no question whatsoever on the necessity for such actions provided the misdemeanours are proven beyond all reasonable doubt.

Traditionally, editors are allowed unbridled freedom to go about doing their work. Editorial autonomy and independence is considered to be a sacrosanct privilege of an editor of a medical journal. No pressures or leanings of any sort should ever be levered on a medical editor to deviate from his or her inviolable pathway of impartiality and objectivity. Editors should not be subjected to even subtle and gentle winds to change the course and contents of a journal under any set of circumstances. No political or monetary considerations should ever be allowed to even remotely interfere with editorial functions. If ever editorial sovereignty and authority are threatened in any way, it is inevitable to have

differences of opinion and confrontations between editors and other parties involved with publication of a journal. Such occurrences could escalate into major skirmishes with possibly drastic eventualities.

Some recent developments where extreme actions have been taken against editors by publishers and publishing associations have caused waves of disenchantment in editorial circles. A case in point is the occasion where in the very recent past, John Fletcher, Editor-in-Chief of the Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ) was removed from office by the parent organisation, the Canadian Medical Association (CMA)<sup>1</sup>. They disbanded the Editorial Oversight Committee as well. The latter had in fact been put in place about a decade ago in response to a major controversy over editorial interference. The current episode is almost a *deja vu* phenomenon of those events in 2006, where John Huey, editor of the same journal was sacked by the very same parental organisation<sup>2</sup>. There has been wide ranging condemnation of these episodes and an Editorial in the Canadian Medical Association Journal itself, immediately after these distasteful events in 2016, has expressed grave concerns regarding the event<sup>3</sup>.

The World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) says it is deeply concerned about the CMA's actions. Its Executive Committee wrote an online post that states, "Removing editors for unclear reasons raises concerns about publisher interference that violates the principles of editorial independence advocated by the WAME."<sup>1</sup> A much respected and acclaimed former editor of the British Medical Journal, said the CMA's actions signify the "death throes" of the CMAJ and similar journals around the world. Fewer researchers will want to submit articles to an organization that is "so cavalier about editorial independence" and that the CMA executives "may be the main architects of the downfall of the CMAJ."<sup>1</sup> In an open letter to CMA members, the former Oversight Committee said the CMA ignored its own policies and procedures. The journal is now vulnerable to "the pressures of profitability," they wrote in the letter<sup>1</sup>. Critics imply that these changes could do irreparable harm to the journal, which is Canada's top medical publication, read by many health professionals.

An erudite publication, as far back as in 2006, commenting on the goings on at that time,

proclaims, as quoted *verbatim*<sup>2</sup>, “This is not the first time that an editor of a medical journal, owned by a society, has been shown the door. In 1999, the editors of the Journal of American Medical Association (JAMA) and the New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) were sacked in quick succession. I had predicted: ‘With the current crop of editors in no mood to yield on ‘editorial independence, the uneasy relationship between editors and owners will perhaps continue in the new millennium’. We are back to debating, as we did during 1999-2000, the issue of freedom and space for editors to function, without the fear of vindictive action from owners/publishers. We must discuss the need to build trust and harmony between the two parties. This is more so in the case of journals run by a professional society of medical doctors who, more often than not, have their own agenda that needs to be pushed through politicians. Such associations look to use the column inches of the journal to further their agenda and use the revenue from the journal (many medical journals run by societies are flush with funds thanks to advertisements) to lobby with politicians. Interestingly, editors of all the three journals - JAMA, NEJM and CMAJ - were sacked primarily due to business and/or political reasons and not due to incompetence”.

There may be more than what meets the eye in these occurrences. Many opinions have been expressed. What is of uninhibited concern are the reasons for these actions and the way things have been handled. Unjustified authoritative actions by involved stakeholders against editors for any reason other than incompetence and dishonesty should be roundly condemned.

Our fervent desire is to see that editorial sovereignty is hailed forever as the very backbone on which the status of a medical journal rests. It is the cornerstone on which great journals have been built on and will continue to be the one factor that would separate off those with the highest quality. It is hoped that rationality will triumph in the long run and unmitigated editorial independence will ultimately be held up as the final consideration in all dealings that concern medical journals.

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The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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