

The CMAJ mess

The dispute between the Canadian Medical Association and the Journal of the CMA has been front-page news for the last few weeks. John Hoey, the longstanding editor of the CMAJ, was fired without explanation. Two thirds of the board of the CMAJ resigned in protest. One might not expect internecine battles between publisher and editor to be of such general public interest. Canada, however, is another story. Our health care system is a national preoccupation, and a conflict between the national medical professional organization and the editors of its journal is big news.

It is also very regrettable. The CMAJ has evolved over the last 2 decades from a small regional journal to become an internationally read, highly respected journal (the 5th ranked general medical journal in the world with respect to impact factor). This dispute, which has attracted worldwide interest, has undermined the reputation of the CMAJ. While the journal will recover, this will take some time.

The conflict has been portrayed in stark terms as an issue of editorial freedom. But it comes down to another question: To whom does the journal belong, and what are the owner's rights? This is the nub of the issue. The former editors have stated unequivocally that in their view, the journal 'belongs' to the editors, contributors, and readers. They have harshly criticized the CMA leadership for editorial interference and inappropriate behavior.

But the CMAJ is not an independent unaffiliated journal. It is the journal of the CMA, our professional organization. Is it reasonable that on major policy questions, the journal reflect the Association's perspective?

The major policy question of the day is the role of private sector medicine in Canadian health care delivery. The CMA's view has evolved, somewhat painfully, to an acceptance of the need for private sector medicine to ensure the sustainability and excellence of health care. Polls have shown that this view is held by the majority of Canadian physicians. In contrast, the CMAJ has remained resolutely opposed. The latest manifestation of this was an editorial which was heavily critical of the new Minister of Health, Tony Clement, because of his willingness to consider a more liberal interpretation of the Canada Health Act with respect to private sector medicine. The initial version of the editorial was suppressed, and a more neutral version published. Both versions are now available at <http://www.cmaj.ca/cgi/rapidpdf/cmaj.060290v1>. The initial version, entitled 'Two tier Tony Clement appointed Minister of Health' contains extensive quotes from Carolyn Bennett, a political opponent of Clement's, and the former Minister of the now defunct Ministry of State (Public Health). The original piece is very partisan and negative in tone.

One presumes that there was a great deal of behind the scenes negotiations over a prolonged period before the editors were fired. It is unfortunate that the issue couldn't have been resolved in another way, or that the change of editorship could not have been accomplished less publicly.

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The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors has a position statement on the nature of editorial independence. It states "Owners and editors of medical journals have a common endeavor—the publication of a reliable and readable journal, produced with due respect for the stated aims of the journal and for costs. Owners have the right to appoint and dismiss editors and make important business decisions...editors must have full authority for determining the editorial content of the journal."

The CMAJ has recently published the report of an ad hoc committee, of the Editorial Board to review the issue of editorial independence. The committee offers the CMA a stark choice: accept as inviolable complete editorial independence, or become a medical news magazine. There is no suggestion of working to achieve a balance, whereby the CMA sets overall direction consistent with the vision and mandate of the Association, while ensuring a high degree of editorial independence.

Of course, there is no such dilemma in the newspaper industry. Publishers set overall direction; editors have autonomy and independence within that direction. One cannot imagine Conrad Black (former publisher of the National Post) owning the Toronto Star, or the late Beland Honderich (the Star publisher for many years) owning the National Post, without dramatic changes in tone and politics of those newspapers. Importantly, the dispute between the CMAJ editors and the CMA was about the content of the 'news' section, and emphatically not regarding editorial decisions about which manuscripts to publish. Thus the parallels to the newspaper business are applicable.

Insofar as the owner of a medical journal has the right to hire and fire the editor, it has the right to set overall direction. This right comes with the cost that the journal will be perceived to have a political dimension. However, independence from a governing organization in no way precludes politicization. The Lancet, for example, has taken a vigorous anti-war stance in many editorials and articles which, on the face of it, have little to do with medical practice. In fact, ownership and control by a broadly based organization such as the CMA might result in a less politicized journal, in the sense that this would make a takeover by a narrowly based interest group less likely. And there is also the issue of accountability, which is not addressed by Dr. Hoey or the ad hoc committee. The elected leadership of the CMA is accountable to its members. If the CMA, which owns the CMAJ, has no right to influence overall direction of the journal, to whom are the editors accountable?

This is a painful situation for all parties, and we sympathize with them. Other journals, including JAMA, have survived similar imbroglios. We hope that the CMAJ will resurface as a strong vibrant journal which reflects the values and broad perspectives of the Canadian medical community.

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