

◆ Lundberg's Sacking: Bad News for Editors Around the World

The dismissal of George Lundberg after 17 remarkable years as editor of the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) caused widespread astonishment and evoked the indignation of scientific editors all around the world. George is widely respected and admired as the editor who transformed JAMA from a mediocre mouthpiece of the AMA to a top-drawer international journal published in 17 foreign-language editions. He was a role model for many.

In a stunning demonstration of AMA double-speak, Dr E Ratcliffe Anderson Jr, acknowledged that "JAMA's hard-earned reputation is based on its editorial independence" and then claimed that "we intend to keep it that way." But no one was fooled. The Lancet retorted that "if Lundberg goes, the only honourable thing for the AMA is to fire the man who fired him." Iain Chalmers, who directs the UK Cochrane Center and is a member of the JAMA editorial board, expressed in an Internet message the hope that Dr Anderson "will pay a severe price for his ill-judged interference in the editorial freedom of Dr Lundberg." Many other journals, including the South African Medical Journal (SAMJ), reacted in a similar vein.

In sacking Dr Lundberg, the AMA has set a very bad example, particularly for medical associations in emerging democracies such as South Africa (and, no doubt, Eastern Europe) that are still groping for a *modus vivendi* with their journal editors. These associations often look to US norms and practices as benchmarks for their own conduct. God forbid that they should adopt Dr Anderson's perverse understanding of editorial freedom! The action of the AMA in the Lundberg affair is painfully reminiscent of the conduct of the Medical Association

of South Africa in the bad old days of apartheid. Then, the editor of the SAMJ was forbidden to publish articles critical of the political goings-on, such as physician complicity in the torture and ultimate demise of anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko, at the very same time that the association was seeking international acceptance as an institution dedicated to democracy.

The event demonstrates the vulnerability of association-journal editors everywhere.

It is to be expected that medical associations will disagree with their journal editors from time to time. Therefore, the fact of the AMA leadership's unhappiness with the article in question is not the issue. Indeed, George Lundberg and the AMA had previously had occasion to disagree on the content of editorials and articles published in JAMA on such topics as euthanasia, complementary medicine, and the role of government in health care. What is at issue here is the AMA's violation of the sacred tenet of editorial freedom by removing an editor with whom it disagreed, thereby causing severe damage to the reputation of JAMA. As Stephen Lock has warned, "if a medical organization wants its journal to have international standing and the support of the wider medical community within its own country, it must give its editor independence. Nobody wants to publish in a medical journal that is a constrained parish magazine" (1).

The AMA accused Dr Lundberg of "interjecting JAMA into a major political debate." What's wrong with that? Dr Lundberg did not contrive the article in ques-

tion, which was received, peer-reviewed, revised, and accepted well before presidential impeachment was an issue. Given the article's relevance to the historic debate, it would have been irresponsible not to have had it fast-tracked for publication in time to inform that debate. The AMA's newfound gospel of abstinence from political debate is a sham. The AMA has not hesitated in the past to use JAMA to fight its political battles against government involvement in health care. The AMA is nothing if not political. In recent decades, it has poured millions of dollars into the campaign coffers of conservative candidates for Congress and no doubt acted against Dr Lundberg so as not to be seen to be double-crossing the Republican agenda in the impeachment debate.

That such a gross violation of editorial independence could have happened to an editor of Dr Lundberg's standing, in a country that prides itself on being the beacon of freedom of speech and individual liberty, leaves nought for our comfort. The event demonstrates the vulnerability of association-journal editors everywhere and underlines the need for a universally agreed code of editorial autonomy to be embedded in every editor's service contract. At the same time, nothing in this sad affair should dissuade editors from exercising their right to decide what to publish or from resisting all attempts to turn their journal into a "constrained parish magazine".

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Reference

1. Lock S. Editorial freedom: a modest proposal to Dublin. *BMJ* 1988;296:733-4.