

◆ Margin of Error: Editors and Owners

The news that George Lundberg had been removed as editor of the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) has caused a furor among the editors of other medical journals. Their reaction is understandable: George Lundberg had in his 17-year tenure raised the reputation and visibility of the journal so that it ranked as one of the world's premier medical journals; and as editor-in-chief he has strengthened and invigorated the AMA's other 10 journals.

In a press release, the head of the AMA said that "over time . . . I have lost confidence and trust in Dr Lundberg's ability to preserve that high level of credibility and integrity" and that the decision was made with the "near unanimous support of the Board of Trustees."

The World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) listserv soon accumulated messages expressing the members' anger and disillusionment over the firing. All condemned it, and some went so far as to call it censorship. Within the next few weeks, the weekly powerhouse journals began to run editorials condemning the firing and commenting on various aspects of the situation.

Underlying many of the editorials was the implication, and sometimes more, that this is not the way the system is supposed to work. I both agree and disagree.

I agree with my fellow editors that an owner (sponsoring society) should not summarily fire an editor for anything other than serious legal or moral lapses. Firing should be only a last resort, once the channels of communication with the editor have run their course without a resolution—not the first and immediate action.

I'm afraid that I disagree with them, however, about whether the customary system of editor-owner relationship

worked as intended. We become editors after extensive discussions with the sponsoring society about the journal's purpose, goals, focus, and financial status—the society has concluded that we can be trusted to run the society's prominent and visible journal, operating autonomously day to day and year to year without any interference in our publication decisions; and we accept knowing that one of our jobs is to expand the journal's importance and visibility while serving wholly at the discre-

The society agrees to let us publish what we want, and we agree that the society will fire us when it no longer likes what we are doing.

tion of the society.

To put it starkly, the society agrees to let us publish what we want, and we agree that the society will fire us when it no longer likes what we are doing. (We also agree, to ourselves, that we will resign rather than let the society interfere in our publication decisions.) We are given freedom with a powerful tool, and the price of the freedom is that we will be held directly accountable for our decisions, severally and together, to a body that has different priorities and goals than we may have as editor. And, in a very real sense, the higher our standards and the more seriously we take the larger goals of being editor, the more risks we will take. According to a friend who has been there, any editor who hasn't been fired or come close at least once hasn't been doing the job right.

In this light, JAMA and the AMA each held up their ends of the bargain. JAMA

published articles without interference from the AMA; the AMA fired the editor when it considered that he had gone too far. In this bargain, editors are sometimes crusaders and martyrs, sometimes wrong-headed and perverse; likewise, owners are sometimes long-sighted and level-headed, sometimes hasty and cowardly. In each case, good judgment will be vindicated over time.

Acknowledging that the bargain was kept in the JAMA case does not mean that the AMA handled the situation properly. It seems that the AMA did not try to communicate its concerns to Dr Lundberg. It does not seem that Dr Anderson and Dr Lundberg had ever talked about the AMA's concerns; nor did JAMA's editorial board serve as "translator" and "mediator" to explore the growing gap in the AMA's trust in the editor. It is possible, of course, that months of discussions would have produced the same result. The editor might have resigned quietly, resigned vociferously, or been pushed out or even fired, but he would not have been fired summarily and without a good-faith effort to work properly and fairly with him. Any sponsoring society that removes an editor must be very sure that the removal itself will not do more damage than whatever the editor is doing that raises the issue. It is clear that the AMA made no such calculation, or it could not have summarily removed George Lundberg. ■

Addeane S Caellegh
Editor
Academic Medicine
Washington, DC