

Lundberg Discusses Online Ethics

Barbara Gastel

Trying to regulate the Internet is like trying to regulate the alphabet, observed George D Lundberg, editor-in-chief of the medical Web site Medscape, at the 1999 annual conference of the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA). He made clear, however, that there are ethical principles for editors and writers to follow in deciding content for medical Web sites. He also noted disclosure standards that such Web sites should meet.

Speaking at the general session of the conference, Lundberg focused largely on the ethics of the medical Internet. He also touched on other ethical aspects of editing medical publications. Lundberg had been dismissed from the editorship of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in January 1999 after publishing an article bearing on a political debate then current. (For discussion of issues raised by the dismissal, see *CBE Views* 1999;22(4):103-7.)

Lundberg identified four realms of ethics to draw on regarding the medical Internet: medical ethics as expressed, for example, in a set of principles from the American Medical Association; business ethics as embodied, for instance, in principles of conduct from the US Chamber of Commerce; journalism ethics, such as stated in a code from the Society of

Professional Journalists; and the ethics of medical editing as conveyed, for instance, in statements from the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors.

Those four realms, Lundberg noted, have provided the basis of the advertising policy at Medscape. Among the 12 points in the policy are clear separation of the editorial process from decision-making about advertisements and clear distinction of advertising from editorial content on the Web site. The full set of points is available on the Medscape Web site, www.medscape.com.

Calling them "Journalism 101", Lundberg identified five standards that content on the Web should meet. Users should be able to determine (1) who wrote the material, (2) what the author's affiliation was, (3) what source the information came from, (4) who owns the site, and (5) when the material was posted. Unless these items are indicated, Lundberg said, a site should not be drawn on for medical information.

Lundberg noted that editors of medical journals have relationships with various groups, including readers (who come first among these constituencies), authors, advertisers, peer reviewers, and students; and editors try to please members of all these groups. But the key people to serve are patients: "When you're editing a medical journal, you're basically editing it for the patients."

Later, Lundberg quipped that roles of medical journals include not only shedding light but also taking heat and giving heat.

He envisioned the Internet becoming a prominent medium of continuing medical education. He speculated that because the Internet is interactive, it might prove more effective than conventional continuing-education media in promoting behavioral change.

Lundberg also predicted that "e-mail medicine" will largely replace telephone conversations between patients and doctors. Interaction by e-mail can be excellent, he said, once a patient and doctor have established a relationship; but it should be forbidden unless the doctor has met and examined the patient.

In closing his remarks, Lundberg returned explicitly to the theme of ethics and the medical Internet. His closing words: "It's all based on trust."

The 1999 AMWA annual conference was held on 27-30 October in Philadelphia. Another highlight was a presentation by Richard Harris, scientific correspondent for National Public Radio, who discussed preparing a series of reports on dietary supplements. The conference also included nearly 80 workshops, including workshops on such editorial topics as microediting, macroediting, editing tables and graphs, the editor as production manager, and time management in journal editing.

The 2000 AMWA annual conference will take place on 8-11 November in Miami. Information is available from AMWA headquarters (telephone 301-294-5303; fax 301-294-9006; amwa@amwa.org) and the AMWA Web site, www.amwa.org. 

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