

## Social and Ethical Responsibilities of Journal Editors

*Moderator:*

**Ana Marusic**  
*Croatian Medical Journal*  
Zagreb, Croatia

*Speakers:*

**John Overbeke**  
*Nederlands Tijdschrift voor*  
*Geneeskunde*  
[*Dutch Journal of Medicine*]  
Amsterdam, the Netherlands

**Sue Silver**  
*Frontiers in Ecology and the*  
*Environment*  
Washington, DC

**Richard Horton**  
*The Lancet*  
London, England

*Reporter:*

**Rebecca Ritke**  
*Radiological Society of North*  
*America*  
Oak Brook, Illinois

If journal editors have specific social and ethical responsibilities, what are they? Can they be properly fulfilled within the journal's purview, or do they inevitably extend beyond?

John Overbeke, who edits the only medical journal published in Dutch, outlined his editorial mandate primarily in terms of his journal's purposes at the national level: to provide complete coverage of medical and public-health developments in the Netherlands, in part by soliciting articles about rarely covered topics; to help Dutch physicians publish the results of their research (especially first articles by young doctors) in their own language; to guard scientific integrity and participate in assessing scientific fraud; and to accurately

report medical developments around the world, enabling Dutch leaders to make well-informed decisions and policies.

Ana Marusic described her editorial purview in similarly modest terms while emphasizing the international over the national. The English-language journal of which she is co-editor-in-chief was founded in 1991 to provide a "door" through which local physicians and scientists can be informed about mainstream currents in medicine (such as evidence-based practice) and obtain continuing medical education and a "window" for mainstream scientists into small local scientific communities—mostly in Eastern Europe but also in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere—whose research otherwise would be invisible because of linguistic barriers and financial constraints.

Overbeke and Marusic stressed the importance of their educational mission: to publish educational articles and to teach scientific research methods and English-language writing skills to residents. The Croatian journal hosts annual workshops at which physicians from abroad provide mentoring and opportunities for learning and networking. The goal is to "create a critical mass of researchers able to join mainstream science", Marusic said. "We want our authors to publish once or twice in our journal and then internationally."

The politics implicit in her work, at which Marusic only hinted (quoting Rudolf Virchow at the opening of the session: "Medicine is a social science, and politics is just medicine on a larger scale"), was more explicit in the other two presentations. Sue Silver, whose multidisciplinary journal is aimed at a broad readership of scientists, said that when she arrived in the United States from England in February 2002, the natural environment was "embattled territory", with special-inter-

est groups exploiting bits of information to sway policy-makers and public opinion. Her description of the contest made clear the ever-present ethical and social aspects of what otherwise might seem ethically neutral editorial tasks: to ensure accessible, accurate, and interesting communication of important scientific information; to encourage authors to draw conclusions from their work that are relevant to the "real world"; and to make sure that this information is widely disseminated, both directly and through the mass media.

Richard Horton, in turn, gave an impassioned appeal for social and ethical engagement. We must ask ourselves, he said, "How well does what we do connect with the rest of the world?" It was reported last year in *The Lancet* that 2.4 million children die of malnutrition in India each year. In India and nine other countries, 4 million fetuses die in the womb, another 1 million die between the onset and the end of labor, and 2.5 million die in the first year after birth. Such realities call for a far more radical response than the mere "reconsideration" of health policy recommended by the authors of one article, Horton said. "We should be marching in the streets, not reconsidering!" Health and disease are the most important foreign-policy issues of our time, he asserted—and not only for ethical reasons but also for reasons of economic stability and security.

Asked during the question-and-answer period why *The Lancet* publishes unsigned editorials and whether this practice is in keeping with ethical responsibility, Horton replied that the main point was the message, not the messenger: "Editors come and go; we think we're important, but we're not", he said. "We're guardians of a tradition, a collective memory, and a common purpose." 