

◆ Are Guidelines on Editorial Independence Enough to Protect the Canadian Medical Association Journal and Other Journals?

Speakers:

Claire Kendall
University of Ottawa
Ottawa, Ontario

Sally Murray
University of Melbourne
Melbourne, Australia

Moderator:

Richard Horton
The Lancet
London, United Kingdom

Reporter:

Barbara Gastel
Texas A&M University
College Station, Texas

On 20 February 2006, the editor-in-chief and senior deputy editor of the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* (CMAJ) were fired by the Canadian Medical Association, owner and publisher of the journal, because of “irreconcilable differences”. Apparently, the differences were related in large part to editorial independence regarding news content of the journal. Several others at the journal resigned later as tensions with the publisher continued. Because of the issues raised, CSE, which issued a statement of concern about the firings (www.CouncilScienceEditors.org/about/councilnews.cfm), added to the annual-meeting program a plenary breakfast session featuring two of those who had resigned.

Claire Kendall, an associate editor of CMAJ when she resigned, and Sally Murray, CMAJ editorial fellow at the time of her resignation, opened the session by briefly outlining the events, citing relevant policies of CSE and the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME), and identifying issues raised. They summarized happen-

ings surrounding the contested publication in CMAJ of an investigative report on women’s experience in buying the Plan B emergency-contraception pill at Canadian pharmacies, and they quoted the CSE policy on editorial independence (www.CouncilScienceEditors.org/services/cse_editorial_policies.cfm#Paragraphfive) and the WAME policy on the subject (www.wame.org/wamestmt.htm#independence).

They then asked those attending to discuss the following questions:

- Do the CSE and WAME guidelines on editorial independence need to be reworded to cover news and other non-peer-reviewed journal content?
- Should CSE and WAME encourage journal publishers to provide written statements supporting editorial independence?

To the disappointment of some attendees, the speakers declined, for legal reasons, to describe in detail the exchanges between journal staff members and the publisher.

Discussion by audience members ensued, and highlights included the following:

Iain Taylor, assistant editor-in-chief of the National Research Council of Canada Research Journals, said that “everything between the covers” is the responsibility of the editor of a journal. Martin Blume, editor-in-chief of the American Physical Society journals, expressed agreement. Another attendee, however, noted that the editor must stay within the scope of the journal.

Moderator Richard Horton, editor of *The Lancet*, prompted the group to discuss whether a journal editor should have complete say over news content as well as scientific content. Bill Silberg, who has worked for journals and the popular media

and is now with the Commonwealth Fund, endorsed editorial independence for all content. “Either a publication is in the news business, or it is in the public-relations business”, he said.

Monica Bradford, executive editor of *Science*, said that her publication, which contains both scientific papers and news reports, has a culture of editorial independence. *Science* includes a statement that all articles therein reflect the views of the authors and not those of the publisher, the American Association for the Advancement of Science. She mentioned following guidelines of the American Society of Magazine Editors and said that adherence to standards of journalistic independence was needed to attract the best science journalists.

David Dickson, director of *SciDev.Net* and former news editor of *Nature*, echoed Bradford’s views. The editor of *Nature* “fiercely protected” the news section even when it spoke critically about some scientists who published peer-reviewed articles in the journal, and he deemed such editorial independence vital to the reputation of the publication.

Catherine DeAngelis, editor-in-chief of *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association*, stated that the publisher should not know in advance what the journal will publish; this policy protects both the editorial staff and the publisher from outside pressures.

Stephen Prudhomme, director of scientific publishing at the American Heart Association, emphasized the importance of good communication between editor and publisher—something that he ascertained had been lacking at the CMAJ. In closing, the speakers said that the inability to ensure such rapport necessitates written statements regarding editorial independence. 🔥