

## Following the Inner Call: Life of a Fledgling Editor

When we speak of medical-journal editors, we usually envision venerable and wise old men, such as Stephen Lock and Edward J Huth, or venerable and wise, but not so old, people, such as Richard Smith and Richard Horton. We could even think of venerable and wise (age certainly does not matter) ladies, such as Catherine DeAngelis and Ana Marusic. I doubt, though, that anyone would think of Aleksandra Misak, Pritpal Tamber, Sally Murray, or any other “junior” member of the editorial staff. But make no mistake: The youngsters are there, working hard, learning fast, and some of them even hoping to achieve a career in journal editing. No kidding.

What is there in the job of medical-journal editor that attracts a young and educated person to such a position? And what of those exceptional students or graduates who could, by dint of their talent and achievements, easily get first-class positions at top laboratories and prestigious clinics but who, following some strange inner call, find themselves stuck in the hum and buzz of a medical-journal office? Navin Chohan, former editor of *student-BMJ*, described this strange phenomenon: “The running joke at *BMJ* was always that the people who came as the student editors departed with the grand declaration that they didn’t want to be doctors after all. Strange, given that we were all medical students. This revelation would generally come out after a few months in the driving seat of *studentBMJ*. Of course, the question left lingering in the air was ‘Why?’”<sup>1</sup>

### The Allure of Editorship

Why, indeed? A look at the short biographies of former editors of *studentBMJ* might give us a clue. In only a few years after their *studentBMJ* experience, they were involved in a wide array of activities: freelancing on a book on vocal technique, film-making, interviewing an Anglican exorcist, writing a medical textbook, being a mother, and—expectedly—“hacking their way through a medical career”, to use the expression of one of them.<sup>1</sup> It is obvious that those young men and women have many diverse interests, sometimes

unrelated to medicine but often related to the spoken or written word. In the office of a medical journal, they were able to enjoy the beauties of medicine and the enchantments of words at the same time. For a medical graduate with an inherent curiosity and an itch for broad knowledge, the position of an editor, especially in general medical journals, is most rewarding: Each submitted manuscript offers a new piece of information, presenting advances in various fields of medicine. And the best thing is that the editor does not have to have thorough knowledge in any of these fields; the only expertise he or she requires is in scientific methodology. In today’s world of ever-increasing subspecialization, editors have the unique privilege to be at the cutting edge of medicine while staying broad and universal in their interests. And if they feel an urge to do research themselves, no problem: They can investigate any aspect of the editorial process and present their findings at the International Congress on Peer Review and Biomedical Publication (or perhaps at one of the future annual meetings of the Council of Science Editors).

But the scope of work of a journal editor goes beyond science and medicine. Someone who balances on the thin wire of working in a medical journal should be conversant with the economics and technology of publishing, dealing with the mass media, and even the art of diplomacy. Young intellectuals could also be fired up by the fact that the position of journal editor opens some opportunities for public engagement and activism;<sup>2</sup> and if everything fails, one can still write memoirs.<sup>3</sup> In any case, words and writing are the journal editor’s daily bread. Last but not least, editors can serve as educators, especially if they are (un)fortunate enough to live and work in small scientific communities.<sup>4</sup>

### Hardships of Learning the Trade

If education is the last point on the list of possible reasons for a young person to be attracted to the career of medical-journal editor, it could well be the first point on the opposite list. No institution offers a

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degree in medical editorship. So prospective young editors are often left to their own devices, that is, to learning by doing. When they start to learn their trade, they are overwhelmed by the myriad skills and knowledge they have to adopt right about now: the intricacies of scientific methodology, the deep and muddy waters of statistics, communication with reviewers who turn a deaf ear to all requests and reminders, techniques for pacifying enraged authors whose manuscripts were rejected by the editor-in-chief, managing online and offline manuscript tracking (or distracting!) systems, and so on. Fledgling editors are sometimes given the role of secretary and have to order papers, file folders, and staples for the office and take calls for the editor-in-chief when he or she is away. Of course, fledgling editors have a talent for writing, so they are also appointed to write news, announcements, official letters, press releases, and perhaps, if they are lucky, an editorial. Just when they start to rejoice in the prospect of writing an important, milestone editorial, they recognize that the deadline for the job is tomorrow, and the only free time they have is tomorrow morning, from 5 to 7 AM. (That should, however, not be the obstacle. It is rumored that Richard Horton gets up before dawn and goes to a cafe to write his editorials before showing up at work!)

Even after learning their trade and growing into venerable and wise journal editors, there is no guarantee that they will keep their jobs. Evidence of that may easily be found in the medical literature, for example, by searching PubMed for *sacking*. If journal owners by chance show some benevolence toward the editors, authors will surely not, especially if their manuscripts were rejected. It is not easy for a young person to face the grave prophesy given by Ernest Hart, editor of the *BMJ* from 1867 to 1898: "An editor needs, and must have, enemies; he can't do without them. Woe be unto the journalist of whom all men say good things."<sup>2</sup>

### A Calling, Not a Mere Profession

To survive the challenges without getting disheartened, fledgling editors would be well advised to think of their work as a calling, not a mere profession. There are at least three types of human activities that should be considered callings: healing and teaching are two of them,<sup>3</sup> and pastoral work is an obvious third. In a sense, medical editors incorporate all three callings. They are physicians by education, teachers by necessity, and even, at least symbolically, priests by their position in the world of science. (Hugh Clegg, editor of the *British Medical Journal* from 1947 to 1965, once wrote that "a medical editor has to be a keeper of the conscience of a profession."<sup>6</sup>) Any calling loses its meaning if it is performed only because of money or prestige. The calling of physician is to work for the benefit of patients, of teacher for the benefit of students, and of priest for the benefit of the congregation. The calling of medical editors is to work for the benefit of science and, indirectly, for humanity at large.

And so it goes, from file folders, papers, and staples to inner calls and noble ideals: a fledgling editor, hoping to become venerable and wise. And finally to deal with that manuscript!

### References

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