Editorial

Editorial ‘autonomy’ in learned journals: Lessons from the CMAJ episode

When John Hoey returned from vacation on February 20, 2006 he did not look over his shoulder; a pink slip was delivered to him that afternoon. A normal practice in the West that hardly makes news. But the sacking of Hoey triggered a furore in medical journals as he happened to be the Editor-in-Chief of the widely respected Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ). For good measure, his deputy Anne Marie Todkill was also shown the door. In an unprecedented move, the editor and his senior deputy editor were sacked without notice. The firing of two editors of a prestigious medical journal attracted tremendous outrage, criticism and debate. Editors the world over swung into action with overwhelming support to their sacked colleagues and the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) was taken to task for this ill advised move1,2. The World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) also came out in strong support of the sacked editors3. After all, Hoey and Todkill were respected, courageous and professional editors unafraid of speaking their mind against the establishment which they did with unfailing regularity.

A brief recapitulation of the events that led to the dismissal of Hoey. Under the nine year stewardship of Hoey, the impact factor of CMAJ tripled to 5.9 and the readership grew to an estimated 70,000. With the website attracting over two million visitors every month, the CMAJ currently is among the top ten general medical journals. And Hoey surely could be counted among the most successful editors of the 95 year-old CMAJ.

But the real problem for the editors started in December 2004 when the CMA converted the CMAJ from a not-for-profit to a for-profit entity. The Association restructured many of its publishing and related services (perhaps to generate more revenue for the Society) and sold the CMAJ and its e-version for US $ 3.4 million to the Canadian Medical Association Holdings, a private company owned by the Society4. Thus, instead of being owned and directly managed by the CMA, the CMAJ became part of CMA Holdings Inc. that included CMA Media Inc. Graham Morris, a former newspaper publisher, as President of CMA Media, became the employer (and boss) of Hoey.

But the battle lines between the CMA and Hoey were drawn as early as 2000. Todkill, a journalist, published several stories in the Journal that impacted the CMA and its members. In 2001 the Journal published a piece on the medical use of marijuana which contradicted the official position of the CMA and in 2002 took the Quebec doctors to task for not staffing the ER during the night when a patient with MI brought in at midnight died. The stung Quebec physicians tried to pressurize the CMAJ through the CMA top brass to retract the Editorial. The editors responded by complaining to the Editorial Board of the Journal which rapped the CMA on the knuckles for editorial interference. In November 2005, CMAJ ran a story on how pharmacists were trying to restrict Canadian women access to Plan B, morning - after bill (levonorgestrel). The powerful Canadian Pharmacists Association (CPA) took up the issue with Morris who initially
withheld the news item and later forced the Journal to publish an edited printed version. A critical piece on the pro-privatization policies of Canada’s new Federal Minister for Health Mr Tony Clement, published on the website was widely picked up by the global media. Morris forced the Journal to publish a watered down print version excluding many critical references to the Minister (See 1, 2 and 5 for details).

As editorial independence was being compromised, Hoey set up a Journal Oversight Committee (JOC) to discuss and resolve the conflict between the editors and publisher. Hoey clearly articulated the objectives of the Journal as he felt that the issue of editorial accountability has far wider ramifications than just the relationship between the editor and publisher6. His take on the JAMA episode: “.. any medical journal belongs, intellectually and morally, to its contributors, editors, editorial boards and readers - a sort of constituent assembly. It also belongs to the world: the dissemination of medical science, is or should be, ultimately a humanitarian project, and not merely preserve of professional associations7” says it all. In fact, in the light of furore witnessed8 after the sacking of the editors of JAMA and NEJM and the constitution of the JOC at the CMAJ, Hoey perhaps was over-confident that the CMAJ management would not act in haste. His confidence was misplaced. Soon after the publication of the critical piece against the Minister, Morris sacked Hoey1,2

In newspapers the world-over (scientific journals are also ‘newspapers’ under the law even in India and they need to be registered with the Registrar of Newspapers and with the local police), there is usually a running feud between the publisher (usually the owner or a marketing whiz kid) as to who will call the shots. Less well known is the fact that scientific and medical journals, if they manage to establish reputation among the peer community, could well be money spinners. The Lancet (owned by Reed Elsevier), The New England Journal of Medicine (Massachusetts Medical Society), Journal of American Medical Association (American Medical Association), just to name a few, make a lot of money for their owners. Clearly, the priorities of the owners (even if they are a learned society) and editors are quite different. The publishers usually (perhaps understandably) do not look beyond the balance sheet, and, if the periodical is owned by a Society like the AMA or CMA, actively exploit the medium to promote the interests of the Association and its members. It is also well known that at least in North America, journal revenue funds the lobbying by the Associations. The editors on the contrary would like to publish evidence-based research that benefits patients, informs and educates doctors, promotes excellence and integrity in science and generally strive to make the world a better place to live. There are also a few who would like clean-up the system too (there is a lot of muck out there) just like newspaper editors, by critical appraisal of the government policies and investigate and report any event/policy that would have a direct or indirect impact on public health. Incidentally, such ‘medical journalism’ is almost non-existent in India.

Hoey firmly believed that the editor’s role extends far beyond publishing high quality peer reviewed research and consistently articulated his role as an editor: "Our central objective at CMAJ is to foster excellence in the science and art of medicine, to uphold the ideals of the medical profession and to promote the health and well-being of the public"6. The team of Hoey-Todkill ran some excellent investigative stories that impacted public health in Canada, and elsewhere that were widely acclaimed. In fact, the Plan B story was nominated for a Michener Award, Canada’s most prestigious prize in journalism4. In the process, Hoey constantly annoyed the CMA top brass as his journal was not serving the interests of the Association but constantly annoying the members. So Morris became the hatchet man and got rid of Hoey.
But what the CMA did not foresee was the outpouring of support for Hoey and his team and implosion at the *CMAJ*. There was international outrage and Hoey’s successor Stephen Choi quit when the CMA refused to put an editorial governance plan in place. The CMA was forced to bring in a 71 year-old former *CMAJ* editor Bruce Squires to hold the fort as Editor Emeritus with Noni MacDonald as an interim editor. When several associate editors and 16 of the 19 members of the Editorial Board also quit in protest, the rattled CMA was left with no option but to constitute *CMAJ* Governance Review Panel in March 2006 with the following mandate: “To review the *CMAJ’s* governance structure and to provide objective recommendations to further the *CMAJ’s* continued commitment to editorial independence and maintaining excellence in reporting on the science and art of medicine”. The Panel was chaired by Richard W. Pound, Chancellor at McGill University and an internationally recognized arbitrator. The Panel held wide consultations with the editorial staff, sought inputs from the international scientific community through the CMA website, e-mails and released the final report on July 14, 2006.

Many of its recommendations are in conformity with the issues on editorial governance that Hoey and his successor raised. The Panel endorsed the principles of editorial independence in the proposed structure of governance giving the Editor-in-Chief full control over editorial content, irrespective of the topic, of course with some accountability. Significantly, the Panel made it clear that the editorial content of the *CMAJ* need not necessarily reflect CMA policy. A disclaimer already appearing in the Journal would be made more prominent and that all the editorials will be signed. Also, the Journal will make available as a matter of courtesy, notice of the editorial content of a forthcoming issue to the management just as it gives the media for coverage. The CMA will not be able to influence the publication of that content. However, like any one else, the CMA can put forth its views which will be considered for publication following the usual procedures of editorial evaluation. The *CMAJ* will have a mission statement, written five year contract for the Editor-in-Chief and a well laid down mechanism for evaluating the performance of *CMAJ* and for resolving conflicts. The mandate of the JOC has been revised and expanded to facilitate quick decision making and a framework provided for the annual performance review of the Journal and the Editor-in-Chief. And, finally, restoration of the not-for-profit status of the Journal under the CMA. The CMA swiftly accepted all the 25 recommendations and put into action an implementation plan sending a clear signal that, belated though, the Society is committed to upholding the editorial independence of *CMAJ*. In retrospect, the CMA needs to be commended for executing the tough task of setting up a Committee, bringing out the report and implementing the *CMAJ* governance plan in just six months.

What lessons does the unsavoury *CMAJ* episode have for the learned journals, especially in medical sciences. This is the third major reported sacking of a medical journal editor by the publishers. Some guidelines were put in place when the *JAMA* and *NEJM* editors were dismissed by the respective Associations while the WAME and Council of Science Editors also articulated the roles of editors and publishers. The Pound Committee report adds more clarity on the tenuous relationship between the editor and publisher that should help formulate an ideal governance structure especially in society-run journals. The Panel addressed this issue through a well defined mission statement and how the Journal should work towards the goal, transparent written contract for hiring and firing the Editor-in-Chief, clarity on key accountabilities and responsibilities and annual performance review of editor, etc. Overall, the governance plan put out by the Pound Committee clearly segregates editorial and business activities of the journal with space for both to operate.
The CMAJ governance plan should be very much workable in the Indian setting too. Interestingly, the largest number of medical journals in India are run by learned societies. Many of these Associations elect the editor for a fixed term. A lot of bickering goes on inside (often outside too) the Society offices where these elections are held. But once elected, Editors do enjoy freedom which ironically is often misused to publish papers of indifferent quality of their cronies. Even good journals have gone to seed in the hands of such unprofessional editors and this may well be a major reason for the continued dismal state of many society-run medical journals in India. Unsurprisingly, many members of such Associations prefer to publish abroad while their official organ languishes.

Editorial ‘autonomy’ is complex as the other side of the coin envisages tremendous responsibility, professional and personal integrity and accountability not just to the readers but to the world of science, and beyond. Most reported incidents of public bickering have occurred in journals brought out by learned societies when the Association pushes for promoting its (business and/or political) interests at the cost of journal’s credibility, and the editors resist. Or, when “.. trust, good faith, empathy and open communication10…” so necessary for harmony between the editor and publisher ceases to exist. On the contrary, to the best of my knowledge, no editor of a major journal has been removed for lack of integrity. Scientific journals are expected to work according to a well defined mission. But few journals have a mission statement and usually and ideally should function according to the broad goals and objectives of publication of learned journals which is to report credible research and promote scientific excellence that benefits humankind. Else, as Hoey wrote just after his sacking: “In a world where political correctness obfuscates and public discussions are managed by public-relations firms and paid experts, there is a desperate need for open, plain-spoken discourse. Without it, the current erosion of public trust in science and medicine will continue and will ultimately translate into poorer individual and population health14. The CMAJ is poorer with the departure of Hoey.

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References

3. WAME letter in response to the firing of CMAJ editors. www.wame.org/cmajede.html