

Editorial

Editorial Independence and Ethics of Research Publication

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Less than three days after submission of a manuscript to a medical journal, the author received a letter saying that his paper had been rejected. Unlike many rejection letters this one did not contain any explanation regarding the content of the manuscript or the peer reviewers' opinions. Instead, the letter explained that there are regulations prohibiting the journal from publishing material originating from certain countries (personal communication). As these countries are "embargoed", sanctions against them included any technical and scientific assistance, among them peer reviewing their papers. Several questions remain unanswered here: what is the reason for this decision? Are the public interests and ethical considerations taken into account? What is the role of the editor in this ruling and who is to be held responsible for the content of the journal in question? How should the results be communicated in the presence of such strong political influences? Isn't it true that result communication is what keeps science alive?

Research is incomplete without proper dissemination of findings, and this process depends on a very crucial step: publication. For many years journals have played a pivotal role in this regard, and journal editors, as people responsible for its scientific content, are instrumental for this purpose. Though the

process of publication involves many individuals such as editorial advisors, peer reviewers, technical staff etc., the integrity and credibility of the journal are ultimately in the hands of the editor. Placing such a big responsibility requires certain freedoms to ensure that the editor can fulfill his duties properly and without any fear of unethical pressures imposed on him (her). However, editors are surrounded by numerous factors, which may influence their decisions. Journal owners may press for acceptance or rejection of a manuscript or for a change in the timing of publication of an article. Drug companies, political parties, and mass media are among others who have interests in editors' choices and activities. Scientists and researchers themselves, needless to say, try to influence editors in favor or against a manuscript. Should an editor be tempted to consider these in his (her) evaluations and decisions, it is unclear who is left to protect scientific integrity and the patients', readers' and scientific community's best interest. This is why the editor's independence is so vital to good publication practice.

Among many efforts to protect and guard editorial independence, there are a number of statements by editors' organizations. One of the better-known statements in this regard comes from the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME).¹ The definition of editorial freedom or independence by WAME, which has been adopted by another famous editors' organization, International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE)², is "the concept that editors-in-chief have full authority over the editorial content of their journal and the timing of publication of that content." This means that nobody, including journal owners should "interfere in the evaluation, selection, or editing of individual arti-

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cles either directly or by creating an environment that strongly influences decisions” and on the other hand the editor is only responsible for the validity of the content presented to the audience and not the financial aspects of journal production.

Two famous yet contrary examples of editorial independence are the cases of the Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ) in 2006, and New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) in 1993. In 2006, two senior editors of CMAJ were fired by the Association for what was quoted as “need for a change”. What most of the readers and other editors realized, though, was that these two editors had been fired because they had published articles questioning pharmaceutical industry and the Ministry of Health.³ This decision which was made by Canadian Medical Association (CMA) as the journal owner, resulted in the subsequent resignation of other editors, so that CMA had to appoint a new “interim” editorial team. While the fired editors had, at most, expressed their views on matters directly related to the health of the community, this was frowned upon by Canadian Medical Association, and instead of a constructive discussion which could have led to improvements in health conditions of the society, dramatic events followed for the Journal and CMA. Following this, many editors protested and several editorials and articles were published against this unethical dismissal of editors who had only performed their duties. On the contrary, in 1993 when *New England Journal of Medicine* published an editorial advocating single-payer system,⁴ which was against the views of the owner (Massachusetts Medical Society) a different approach was taken. The president of the society explained their different opinion in a letter which was published, creating an air of honest exchange of opinions. He assured the editor that “the Editor-in-Chief of the *New England Journal of Medicine* has ultimate authority concerning the editorial policies and practices and that these editorial policies and practices are not beholden to any interest group and that in the long history of Massachusetts Medical Society ownership, the preservation of authority of the Editor-in-Chief for the contents and style and format of the *Journal* including its front cover remains intact.”⁵

Politics can also be the subject of editorial freedom. Whether or not medical journals should play a role in political debates has always been a source of con-

trovery.⁶ In 1999, the editor of Journal of American Medical Association (JAMA) was fired because he published a report which concluded that US college students did not think of oral sex as “having sex”.⁷ This article was independently peer reviewed, revised and accepted in accordance with journal policies. The editor’s fast-tracking of the article’s publication caused it to coincide with the Congressional impeachment proceedings involving President Bill Clinton over the Monica Lewinsky affair. In these proceedings, President Clinton’s interpretation of “having sex” was a matter of contention.⁸ The decision of American Medical Association to fire their editor was viewed as breaching editorial freedom in the eyes of many editors and academics. It was generally believed that while the editor had indeed published the article earlier than what it was supposed to, this was nothing beyond his role, since the article had already been accepted and the interpretation following the political debates at the time had nothing to do with the editor’s decision.

But to what extent are editors independent? A report published in 2002 by Davis and Mullner⁹ showed that among editors of 33 journals owned by non-for-profit organizations, 23 enjoyed complete editorial freedom and the remaining 10 scored their level of independence as high. This was a study on 10 journals represented in ICMJE, and the others were high impact general or specialty journals. One could argue that this is not a truly representative sample of biomedical journals and the results may be biased towards a favorable picture of the situation governing editor-owner interactions. Moreover, the authors believed that sometimes the level of independence is unrealistically overstated by editors since they are not aware of the full extent of freedom they must enjoy. They recommended stronger safeguards and guarantees to protect this freedom.

Not only journal owners sometimes threaten editorial independence, but also due to the potential power of medical journals as trusted and valid means of scientific communication, politics often finds ways to control journal editorial decisions. The example at the beginning of this article illustrates one way of such political intrusions. In 2001 the US Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) banned the publication of peer-reviewed and edited scientific journal articles written by authors from countries under U.S. trade sanction. On

several occasions authors from Iran, Libya, Iraq, Sudan, and Cuba were notified by editors that their articles had been rejected to abide by these regulations. This was a clear infringement of editorial independence in which editors had to base their decisions about a manuscript on nothing but the authors' nationality. There were widespread discussions and protests against this by the academic societies and journals.¹⁰ Ultimately, WAME issued a statement on geopolitical intrusion.¹¹ This statement emphasized those decisions about publishing a manuscript must solely depend on the scientific and intellectual content and should not be influenced by geopolitical concerns. It said that "Editorial decisions should not be affected by the origins of the manuscript, including the nationality, ethnicity, political beliefs, race, or religion of the authors. Decisions to edit and publish should not be determined by the policies of governments or other agencies outside of the journal itself." Following this statement and joint efforts of scientists, OFAC withdrew its ban in 2004, saying that routine practices necessary to prepare manuscripts for publication did not violate sanctions.¹² However, the matter still comes to notice now and then and some journals still feel safer to be conservative. A recent discussion on WAME listserv showed that the problem is not still totally resolved (personal communication). Instances of such practice are seen in other countries as well. One interesting suggestion which was put forward in WAME but never found its way into practice, was the formation of a journal to promote peace.¹³

When we talk about science dissemination, it is necessary to provide equal publication opportunity for high quality research from all around the world regardless of political, economical, and personal concerns. Selective reporting of research results and thus neglecting the important contribution of findings from certain parts of the world can have dramatic influences on the body of existing evidence. One immediate effect will be on further investigations and also the results of meta-analyses. The very basis of evidence-based practice is making decisions based on best research evidence, and by limiting the source of information, we run the risk of ignoring critical material, which might affect the health of individuals and societies. So apart from the arguments for the editorial independence, one might add this as another reason why geopolitically influenced deci-

sions about research publication are unethical.

Editorial independence is only one side of the coin in the ethics of editorship. On the other side editors must themselves undertake not to let any outside influence affect their role and responsibilities as independent journal authorities. Editors must not select or reject material for publication on any basis other than merit. They must be free from conflicts of interest that might bias them in choosing reviewers, making editorial decisions, or issuing public statements. By doing so, journals can gain the full trust of readers and researchers and can play their vital role in evenhanded research dissemination.

One must not forget that publication is a tool to provide a milieu for open debate, which will lead to further improvement in research. When a journal gains reputation through proper editorial conduct and finds a place among members of the scientific community, it does not belong to a specific organization anymore.⁵ The journal responsibility at such a level goes beyond serving as a medium for the journal owner, and becomes one of an international tribune for academic discourse and free exchange of valid scientific opinions. This means that the journal must be careful about the policies guaranteeing this freedom and must be aware of threats to its scientific integrity when editorial independence is breached. In other words, ethics of publication becomes meaningless in the absence of independent editors as its guardians.

Many Iranian medical journals are run by universities, and editors are appointed by a manager who may be faculty dean or university chancellor. Traditionally, most contributions come from the same university and sometimes these journals are viewed as facilities for boosting the university's scientific production. This has even led the Ministry of Health and Medical Education to set regulations to discourage increased number of same-university affiliated publications in these journals. To what extent these may affect editorial independence is not clear. *Archives of Iranian Medicine (AIM)*, has had the privilege of being run by the Academy of Medical Sciences, which is not a research/teaching organization by itself, and its independent policy is apparent by the diversity in the journal editorial board and also variety in the received/accepted manuscripts. This is necessary, but not enough to guarantee independence in reviewing and accepting manuscripts and

making editorial decisions based on scientific merit. Editors know that “if they are doing their jobs well, they should give no favors, and they should have no friends.”⁵ The only reason *AIM* editors stay to “do their job well” is their hope for the continued respect for editorial independence from the Academy’s management.

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