CMA draws criticism for sacking editors

David Spurgeon *Quebec*

The firing of two top editors from the *CMAJ* (the journal of the Canadian Medical Association) has drawn harsh international criticism from the scientific and editorial communities as an assault on editorial independence. But the journal's publisher, Graham Morris, insists that, after 10 years with the same editors, "It was time for a fresh approach."

John Hoey, the editor in chief, and his deputy editor, Anne Marie Todkill, were both dismissed on 20 February by Mr Morris. Dr Hoey, Ms Todkill, and other staff said that they were told not to comment on the firings. And Mr Morris said, "It's our policy not to comment on staff issues."

Stephen Choi, the acting editor, and other editorial staff, are understood to be considering their position, depending on how the CMA responds to demands for proper mechanisms to protect editorial freedom.

Mr Morris, the president of CMA Media Incorporated, which owns and publishes the journal, said that Dr Hoey "had done a good job in improving the quality of the journal." CMA Media is a subsidiary of CMA Holdings, a subsidiary of the Canadian Medical Association.

CMAJ had for some time been in dispute over freedom from interference in editorial decisions, as can be seen in an editorial published on 3 January (*CMAJ* 2006;174:9). The editorial said that the journal's editorial independence had been compromised when an executive at the Canadian Medical Association objected strenuously to the way in which a news article was being prepared on over the counter access to the emergency contraceptive levonorgestrel (Plan B) (*BMJ* 2005;331:1360, 10 Dec).

The objection to journalistic

methods was conveyed to the journal's editors and its publisher. The latter subsequently instructed the editors to withhold the article. A truncated version of the article was published on 6 December (*CMAJ* 2005;173:12).

The editorial, published on 3 January, said that the news story was intended to raise concerns about the intrusive and wide-ranging questions that pharmacists were asking women who were trying to access emergency contraception. For that purpose the authors of the article had asked 13 women to present themselves to pharmacists across Canada to request the drug. It was this investigative method that the CMA executive objected to.

"The CMA questioned the propriety of our investigation and the boundary between news reporting and scientific research. Our story was not scientific research, however, but legitimate journalism."

As a result of the intervention the women's testimonies were removed. But the editorial said that that was a serious omission. "Presenting patients' experiences was crucial. That perspective was lost in the published version," the editorial explained.

Another example of disagreement between the journal's editors and the association involved an online story about the appointment of Canada's new Conservative health minister, which contained strong criticism of the direction his policy was likely to take (*BMJ* 2006; 332:384, 18 Feb). In this case, the online story as originally written was withdrawn, and then it reappeared, altered, on the website. It has now been withdrawn from the website and has not yet appeared in the printed journal as planned.

In January, Jerome Kassirer,

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The firing of John Hoey as editor in chief of the *CMAJ* was "a crime against intellectual freedom"

professor of medicine at Tufts University School of Medicine, in Boston, Massachusetts, was appointed by Dr Hoey as chair of an advisory committee to investigate the governance of the journal and make recommendations for protecting editorial autonomy. He called the journal firings "extremely unfortunate, perhaps outrageous. Fundamentally, the Canadian Medical Association intimidated the editors into doing something they shouldn't have done" (*Toronto Star* 22 February, p A2).

Dr Kassirer, a former editor in chief of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, lost his own job in a dispute with his publisher, the Massachusetts Medical Society, over the society's plan to use the journal's reputation to market other publications.

Donald Redelmeier, a member of *CMAJ*'s editorial board and a professor of medicine at the University of Toronto, told the *BMJ* that Mr Morris was right in saying that medical journals needed renewals from time to time, but he said that this dismissal was conducted in a "shocking and unexplained manner."

Dr Redelmeier said that the editorial board would draft an

open letter to the association and call for more affirmations of editorial independence. He found it surprising that the oversight committee, which was supposed to handle disputes between editors and the journal, was unaware of what was going on.

The oversight committee, established a few years ago to protect editorial independence, and which has accrued an increasing number of CMA officials, is widely viewed to have failed in its remit.

Ivan Barry Pless, director of clinical research at the Montreal Children's Hospital Research Institute, told the *BMJ* that he was "appalled" at the firing. In light of the circumstances "it is difficult to imagine any self respecting editor agreeing to replace Hoey."

And in a letter to the Canadian *Globe and Mail* newspaper (23 February, p 16), Adriane Fugh-Berman, associate professor in physiology and biophysics at Georgetown University, Washington, DC, wrote, "The [journal under John Hoey became] a model for fiercely independent scientific analysis and evidence-based public health promotion. The firing... is a crime against intellectual freedom." □