New editor

Comings and goings, Hail and Farewell!

I B Pless

Departure of a cherished leader and introduction of our new editor

FAREWELL

This journal was the brainchild of Mike Hayes who came up with the idea while I was on sabbatical in London in 1994. We discussed the matter, and, as I recall, the next step was for him to take it to Alex Williamson, whose title at the time was Specialty Journals Manager. In typical fashion, she asked a number of tough, intelligent questions. Alex was cautiously receptive to this unusual suggestion just as she has been to most new and challenging ideas. It was only after the International Conference in Atlanta that she decided to fully support our bid. About 50 colleagues gathered one night in a small, hot hotel meeting room to discuss the suggestion. I believe it was the enthusiasm and almost unanimous agreement that the field desperately needed a journal of quality that persuaded her. It was Alex who presented our arguments for this new journal to the BMJ board. The rest is history. Since then, she has been a constant, unflagging supporter, staunch ally and wise counselor. Equally important, to Mike and I and many of the board who she met at the several subsequent international conferences, she remains a warm friend.

Before coming to the *BMJ* in 1990, and after graduating from Leeds with an Honours BSc in Zoology and Biochemistry, this remarkable woman held several positions. These included information officer, editor and production editor of *Nucleic Acid Abstracts*, administrator of a firm in Venezuela, freelance editor, an English teacher, executive editor at Butterworth, senior editor at Macmillan, and finally, publisher in the

Alex Williamson.

scientific and medical division of Macmillan. No wonder she was given the challenging job of *BMJ* Medical Journals Publisher when she applied. No wonder too that she rose so rapidly to ever-increasing levels of responsibility in the *BMJ* specialty journals realm.

Unfortunately, "Alex", as she is fondly known by dozens of editors and all her colleagues, is about to retire. By the time this issue appears, she will be setting off to conquer new horizons. She will leave behind a deep well of energy, imagination, humor, tact, and toughness, along with a wide range of skills. Every reader of this journal and the hundreds of authors whose work we have published owe her an enormous debt. We deeply regret her departure—it is not possible to imagine that this indefatigable workhorse will actually retire. Watch carefully to see what she chooses to do for an encore. For now, from the bottom of our collective hearts, thank you Alex, merci beaucoup, muchas gracias.

HAIL

One of Alex's last acts on our behalf was to lead the search for a new editor. She did so with the able assistance of Fiona Godlee, the *BMJ* editor, Ian Roberts, and Mike Hayes. (Jo Sibert was also enlisted but took ill on the day of the interviews.) Applicants' résumés were reviewed and a short list was compiled. After telephone interviews, the leading applicant, Brian Johnston, was invited to a further in-person interview in London. Last week, Alex called me with the good news that he had been selected to be our new editor. We warmly welcome Brian and thank Fred Rivara, his colleague, for urging him to apply for the position. Brian is a pediatrician from Seattle who has a long interest and commitment to injury prevention. His perspective is a broad one, influenced in part by a stint in the US Public Health Service when he was posted to a Navajo reservation in New Mexico. He splits his clinical time between a low-income urban primary care clinic and the inpatient wards of a regional trauma center. He has academic interests in the implementation of effective prevention programs in real world settings.

After meeting him, Mike Hayes wrote: "Brian is a person with vision and a commitment to the subject that I am sure will extend to the journal in a broad sense ranging from studying root causes through to addressing the needs of people working in the field. He is very personable and plans to continue with moderate clinical hospital work.... Although the financial side of the journal is not strictly his problem, he recognizes the issues associated with the web and free access. Linked to this, he spoke sensibly about the need to ensure that the journal is attractive to a wide range of readers."

I will write a more extended farewell in the next issue but for the present I wanted to share these important announcements.

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EDITORIAL

Protecting children from dangerous products: fundamental change needed

I B Pless

This summer many parents in North America (and perhaps elsewhere as well) experienced considerable anxiety when they learned that certain children's toys were unsafe. Problems with lead paint and with potentially detachable components that could lead to choking had been identified. Most of these products had apparently been imported from China. Mattel, one of the largest toymakers and distributors, recalled hundreds of these toys, and Walmart, one of the largest retailers in the world, offered to reimburse parents if the product was returned.

In the USA the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) is responsible for protecting the public from "unreasonable risks of serious injury or death from more than 15,000 types of consumer products". Its main approach to doing so is to issue recalls or recall alerts and to announce these both in the media and on

its website.¹ A similar, passive approach is used in Canada.

The problem with this "strategy" is that it places the lion's share of responsibility on the shoulders of parents. A study addressing this problem has recently appeared in the *Canadian Journal of Public Health*.² I was the lead author of what was, in effect, a randomised trial to determine if parents can be adequately informed about hazardous products through posters in doctor's offices, the media or the Internet. The simple answer seems to be that none of these means is effective.

For example, the CSPC website states: "You can find information on over 4,000 product recalls and recall alerts using the various searches on this page." No doubt "you" can if you know all about RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds and have the skill and patience to navigate all the links. For me, it would be difficult, to

say the least. And the news media, having frightened parents about the possible dangers, invariably point to the websites for details about any specific product. My conclusion is that the passive approach is wrong; it has been shown to be ineffective scientifically and it is morally offensive.

Instead, as we argue in our paper,² what is needed is for agencies such as the CPSC to adopt the precautionary principle so that the burden is on the manufacturer and distributor to ensure that what is being sent to the marketplace is safe. This is what we expect of pharmaceuticals and we should expect no less for toys. Indeed, this principle should be the bedrock of most injury prevention efforts. The principle represents a fundamental change in our thinking, and needs to be better understood and seriously considered in our search for solutions.

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