

# The Aftermath of the George Lundberg Affair: Comments on Editorial Independence and the Relationships between Editors and Appointing Bodies

S T Lee,\* *FAMS, MBBS (Adel), FRCS (Edin)*

Two months have elapsed since the controversial sacking of George D. Lundberg, the highly esteemed editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*. He was summarily dismissed from his post, a position he had held for 17 years, by the Executive Vice-President of AMA, E. Ratcliffe Anderson, on 15 January 1999.<sup>1,2</sup> The stated reason for his dismissal was that “Dr Lundberg, through his recent actions, has threatened the historic tradition and integrity of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* by inappropriately and inexcusably interjecting *JAMA* into a major political debate that has nothing to do with science or medicine”. The actions referred to was the intended publication of an article on the survey of the sexual behaviour of undergraduate students from 29 states in the US and their definition of what constitutes sex. This article has since appeared in the January 20, 1999 issue of *JAMA*. The “crime” that George Lundberg had allegedly committed was to accelerate the peer review process of this manuscript to allow its publication to coincide with the Congressional impeachment debate of President Bill Clinton, thereby politicising the journal.

The sacking elicited an immediate and spontaneous response from medical editors worldwide.<sup>3</sup> Most who wrote into the *JAMA* and the *British Medical Journal (BMJ)* websites expressed a sense of outrage at the precipitate manner in which a prominent and distinguished editor had been dismissed and felt that the reasons for his dismissal by the AMA Executive Vice-President were unacceptable and unjustified. Arnold Relman,<sup>4</sup> Emeritus Editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)* summed up the feelings of editors as follows: “Dr Anderson refers to his appreciation for the editorial independence and integrity of the journal when what he does undermines that very independence and integrity (of *JAMA*). His actions belie his words”. The President of the Council of Biology Editors, Patricia Huston,<sup>5</sup> concurred and similarly expressed “that when Dr Anderson dismissed the Editor-in-chief on the basis of the publication of a peer-reviewed study, he blatantly usurped editorial freedom”.

Many courses of actions were suggested by the correspondents who wrote in, either directly to Dr Anderson and the AMA or to *JAMA* and *BMJ* websites. There were strong condemnation of the actions of the Executive Vice-President, calls for his removal and the re-instatement of the Editor, appeals for boycott of the journal by subscribers and authors and even the establishment of an award on editorial integrity to be named after George Lundberg.

As quickly as the storm arose, it settled. On 3 February 1999, the AMA and George Lundberg issued a joint statement<sup>6</sup> to announce that both parties had reached agreement on the terms of Dr Lundberg’s departure as editor of *JAMA*. This surprisingly rapid and amicable settlement was broached, purportedly for the continuity of the journal so that it can “carry through its mission without distraction” and also in the best interests of *JAMA*. AMA immediately proceeded to appoint a search committee to identify a successor to George Lundberg. Dr Anderson<sup>7</sup> stated that “we will encourage the Committee to take as much time as necessary to make sure that they find the right person for the job” and the *JAMA* press release emphasised that “Editorial Independence is key in selecting the new *JAMA* Editor”. George Lundberg himself was named as the Editor-in-Chief of Medscape, a leading medical website on the Internet, a post he readily accepted.

Although the whole saga of the sacking of George Lundberg as editor of *JAMA* appears to be over with the announced settlement between AMA and George Lundberg, for the rest of the medical editors worldwide who were caught in this editorial storm of the sacking and the subsequent protests, the whole issue of editorial independence and integrity have remained largely unresolved. There is a pall of gloom and uncertainty that now hangs over the heads of editors. This episode has re-surfaced the sensitive and important issue of the special relationship between the editor and the appointing body. Going through the minds of most medical editors now is the thought that if George Lundberg, a pre-eminent and larger-than-life editor of perhaps the biggest circulation journal in the world can be given

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\* Editor and Chairman of Editorial Board  
*Annals, Academy of Medicine, Singapore*

the sack for an allegedly simple editorial lapse, what holds sway for lesser mortals? All members of the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) must be concerned about their continued independence and integrity of their respective journals and perhaps more importantly, the security of their employment or post. Will they now have to constantly look over their shoulders to ensure that they do not incur the wrath and displeasure of their journal owners or appointing bodies?

The special relationship between the editor and the journal owner varies a great deal between major circulation journals (*JAMA*, *BMJ*, *NEJM* and *Lancet*) which employ full-time editors and the smaller circulation journals (specialty journals, medical society publications) whose editors are usually appointed on a part-time basis with specified tenure. The *Annals* belong to the latter category.<sup>8</sup> For a full-time editor, the contract with the appointing body will be similar to any other editorial post and obviously the terms of employment will be clearly spelt out, as in the case of the editor of *JAMA*. The authority to hire and fire lies with the Executive Vice-President of AMA but with the *British Medical Journal*, the editor of *BMJ*<sup>9</sup> is answerable not to a particular individual but to the general body of BMA at large. With part-time editors, who represent the vast majority of medical journals worldwide, their relationship with the appointing body or society is quite different because their positions are usually honorary (i.e. without remuneration) and their contributions are more a labour of love. A conflict of interest and interference of editorial functions are less likely to occur with honorary and part-time editors and there is usually greater mutual respect between the editor and society because each party has more to gain by maintaining a healthy professional relationship.

The World Association of Medical Editors<sup>10</sup> (WAME) was formed in 1995 following an initiative by the Bellagio Group of 22 medical editors to address common problems faced by editors worldwide. Each editor working with his/her own editorial board has to contend with a great number of issues. Peer-review workshops have been held to address one such specific issue. I think that editorial independence and freedom from external interference including the association or appointing body is another issue that is worthy of a joint discourse amongst editors worldwide. Editorial independence is the cornerstone for the integrity of a journal. I believe WAME should take the initiative to lead this debate through tele-conferencing or organising a workshop so that we can come out with some guidelines on the conduct of Editor-Owner relationship and some good can come out of this sad George Lundberg saga.

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