

Trust and Editorial Independence-A Vision for the Annals

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The latest casualty in the "Editor-Owner" debacle, the forced departure of Jerome Kassirer as Editor-in-Chief of the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine* (NEJM),¹ has prompted me to reflect on the future of the Annals. Could the recent momentous termination of editorial stewardship of the two leading medical journals, JAMA and NEJM, have a domino effect on smaller circulation journals such as the Annals? Will "bottom-line" considerations dominate the thinking of owners/publishers when the reputation and excellence of their journals are at stake? Will editorial independence and integrity of the journal be sacrificed?

A healthy relationship, as in a marriage, is built on trust. In the case of the Annals,² this has been a pre-eminent feature in my years of association with the journal and its publisher, the Academy of Medicine. The appointment of the editor to a 2-yearly renewable tenure is done by the Academy's Council and the position is an honorary one. But the Editor is given full rein and responsibility to manage the journal. The entire character, finances, contents and standing of the Annals rest solely on the shoulders of the Editor. He is supported by the Editorial Board but he is answerable to the Council of the Academy and periodically reports on outstanding matters related to the journal. By and large, he is given full independence to structure and manage the journal.

As a direct consequence of this healthy partnership, in the last two decades, the Annals has grown from very shaky beginnings to be an indexed bi-monthly journal that has confidently stood alongside the major circulation journals in regional and international fora. In 1979, the Annals was accepted for inclusion in the Index Medicus and Medline Database. From 1985, the Annals began a series of medical writing and editing workshops, involving Editors such as Stephen Lock of BMJ (1985, 1988), George Lundberg of JAMA (1991), Bob and Suzanne Fletcher of the Annals of Internal Medicine (1994) and Richard Horton of Lancet (1996). In 1993, the Annals established dialogue with the Vancouver Group³ (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors) which led to the active participation of the Editor in 1995 in the Bellagio Conference, culminating in the formation of the World Association of Medical Editors.⁴ To keep pace with the rapid advances in Information Technology, the Annals went online in 1998 and in the same year, ran a workshop on Electronic Publication with the participation of the Medical Journal of Australia.

It is my conviction that a journal can only grow in stature if it is given the mandate and the editorial independence by the owner/publisher to explore new frontiers and spread its wings. The journal will need financial resources to flourish and initially may need assistance from the parent organisation but if it is successfully managed, it should be able, through subscriptions, advertisements and donations, to be financially viable and independent of the publisher/owner. Although the Annals is a publication and organ of the Academy and each Fellow receives a copy of the bi-monthly issue free, it receives no subsidy from the Academy. But through the years, with sound financial management, the Annals has been able to sustain its growth and development without being a burden to the Academy's Council. Hence, with trust and good governance, both the Annals and the Academy have greatly benefitted from this mutually supportive relationship.

Where does the future lie? I envisage that the succession of the editorship of the Annals will be a smooth process, unlike the tumultuous and acrimonious separations that have beset JAMA and NEJM. A smooth transition will ensure that the quality of journal will not suffer in the change-over. In the history of the Annals, there have only been three editors and the longevity of editorship reigns attest to the strength of this close partnership between the journal and its publisher. This special trust is a tradition worth preserving for posterity.

My successor, Dr Felix Sundram, who has been guarding the coffers of the Annals and a tower of support, takes over from me on the first day of the new millennium. I am sure he will take the Annals to greater heights and if the trust and editorial independence prevail, I feel confident that the Annals will continue to grow from strength to strength.

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