

# New editorial board for *The Journal*

An editorial advisory board may be crucial to maintenance of the editorial independence of *The Pharmaceutical Journal*. Olivia Timbs, editor of *The Journal* and editorial director of PJ Publications, explains why

When I joined *The Pharmaceutical Journal* five years ago, I was asked by the Council of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society to establish an editorial advisory board for *The Journal*. The board's remit was to support the editor and editorial staff in producing a high-quality publication of relevance to members of the Society, and to advise the editorial team in the strategic planning of *The Journal*. Day-to-day editorial decisions were to remain the responsibility of the editor and the editorial staff, although we would remain accountable to the Council for *The Journal's* editorial content.

An editorial advisory board was duly formed later in 2001 and, without a doubt, it has done a good job, particularly in helping staff build up contacts in the profession, acting as a sounding-board for ideas, and telling us when we have done some things well and others things not so well.

However, over the past five years many things have changed. *The Pharmaceutical Journal* is the keystone of PJ Publications, which has been established in a business unit (RPS Publishing) alongside the Pharmaceutical Press and the British National Formulary. RPS Publishing — “the wholly owned publishing organisation of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain” — has its own board structure designed to support any developments needed to secure the financial contribution PJ Publications makes to the Society. It also ensures the workings of the unit reflect good business practice and governance.

Another change over the past five years is that members of *The Journal's* staff have become more confident in their own abilities to provide a publication that is useful, informative and professionally produced. Members of the news team, in particular, have worked hard in developing their contacts and digging out stories of value to the profession as a whole.

## Pig-in-the-middle

Few readers of *The Journal* over the same period, however, can have failed to notice the strains between different factions of the profession that, at times, seem to have threatened the very fabric of the Society. Although not always visible to the casual reader, *The Journal* has occasionally found itself being pig-in-the-middle, with different groups and individuals attempting to influence *The Journal's* content.

We have done well to resist the pressures and, in the process, may have produced content that may not always have impressed these different groups (some of whose number have accused us of being partisan and even dangerous). However, in our view, we have success-

fully served the wider profession; after all, not all pharmacists are obsessed with pharmacy politics.

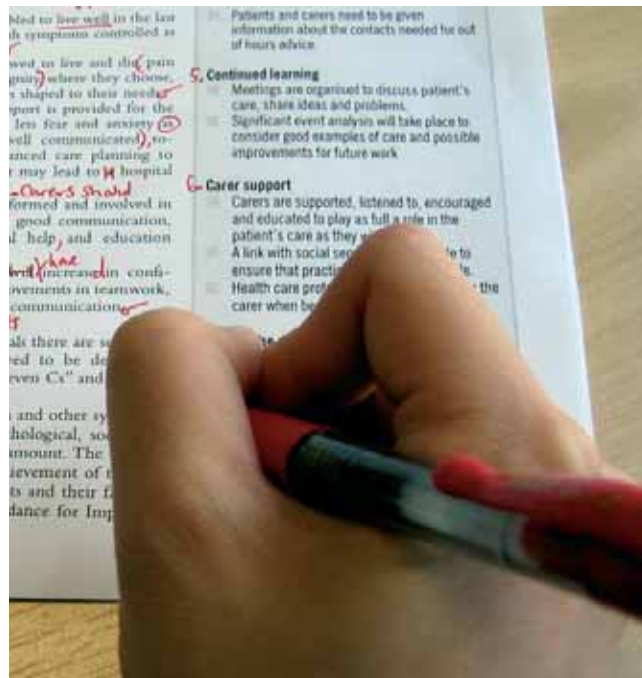
The Council, as a body, even though *The Journal* is accountable to it for its editorial content, has never sought to interfere with what we carry, although I am sure there are times when it would have liked to. Editorial freedom underpins *The Journal's* existence. Successive editors and staff have considered themselves to be the custodians of that editorial freedom for future generations and, therefore, have fought hard to protect it. The editor and the editorial staff acknowledge that they have to act within certain boundaries because they are, in fact, directly employed by the Society.

So what is editorial freedom or independence all about? The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors has drawn up a statement on editorial independence that includes the following: “Journal owners should not interfere in the evaluation, selection or editing of individual articles either directly or by creating an environment that strongly influences decisions.”

As far as *The Journal* is concerned, editorial freedom means that we have the right to publish what we want and the right to reject what we do not want without fear or favour. Despite what some might believe this is not censorship.

If material is rejected, it is always for a good reason. Material may be inaccurate, misleading or defamatory, or draw factually suspect conclusions. Publishing such material does not serve the profession well and could cause legal difficulties for all concerned. Thus, in the interests of transparency and good governance, we have decided to establish a new sort of editorial advisory board, and submit our decision-making processes to independent scrutiny.

We are not alone. When Richard Smith left the *BMJ* just over 18 months ago, his final editorial comment was devoted to the need for an editorial advisory body to protect the *BMJ's* position, and he cited *JAMA's* oversight committee as being a good example. “The optimal answer is probably an oversight committee like that created by the American Medical Association after the firing of an



editor of *JAMA*,” he wrote. “The committee should comprise widely respected figures from medicine and serve as a buffer between the editor and the British Medical Association, providing a judgement on the editor's performance and settling disputes.”

## Pressure

More recently, the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* published a leading article at the beginning of this year, describing in detail the inappropriate pressure it was put under not to publish an investigative article about over-the-counter access to emergency levonorgestrel. The CMA wanted the article withheld following a complaint from the Canadian Pharmacists Association.

The CMA, as publisher, was able to exert considerable pressure and the article, when it appeared, was not as the editor had originally planned but a “negotiated revision”. This was followed up with the leading article discussing editorial freedom which included the announcement that the journal had “established an advisory group to examine *CMAJ's* editorial autonomy and governance structure” and to look into the issues of the *CMAJ's* editorial independence. Tensions between the CMA and the *CMAJ* have been simmering for some years and, as things stand at the moment, the CMA board has yet to agree formally to “protect the editorial freedom and independence of the *CMAJ*”. Then, on 20 February, the whole issue came to a head and the editor and deputy editor of *CMAJ*, were sacked, triggered by a criticism made online

## Panel 1: Terms of reference for the new board

- To help ensure that *The Journal's* independence and integrity are maintained, whatever the political or economic pressure
- To help ensure that *The Journal* follows the highest journalistic standards
- To comment on disputes between *The Journal* and a member or fellow of the Society, a member of the Council or a director of the Society
- To comment if the editor believes that the editorial freedom of *The Journal* is being threatened

Complaints to and comments from the editorial advisory board will be reported to the Society's Council. The Council may decide to take further action.

Board meetings will take place when issues are raised and there will be one public meeting a year. When an urgent issue is raised, at least three members of the editorial advisory board (including the chairman) will be contacted for comment. The chairman would be invited to attend one Council meeting per year to report on the board's activities.

Board members must not hold office in the Society structure where there could be a conflict of interest between the two roles (such as member of Council or an employee of the Society).

Editorial advisory board members will remain on the board for a maximum term of three years (with the exception of the chairman whose term of office could be renewed with the agreement of the editor and the Council).

about the likely policies of Canada's new health minister — a criticism the CMA did not like.

Staff at *The Journal* do not believe that the Council of the Society would ever take such summary action but, for *The Journal* to be taken seriously, editorial independence must not only exist but be seen to exist.

As Fiona Godlee, *BMJ* editor, states (4 March, *Editor's choice*): "Tensions are bound to exist between journal editors and owners. I could argue that unless these exist the editor is not doing her job. But editors must be accountable and accept that there are limits to their freedom: a series of poor decisions or unethical behaviour would be reasons for removing an editor. . . . However, a journal's credibility cannot survive interference from its owner."

Dr Godlee goes on to explain that, in the context of the CMA debacle, serious damage has been done to the CMA's reputation. It can only be salvaged if the CMA commits "to establishing proper mechanisms to protect the journal from political or commercial interference and must make a public statement supporting editorial independence (as the BMA has)" and as did the Society's Council before I was appointed (*PJ*, 14 October 2000, p549).

So what do we think the editorial advisory board will do for *The Journal* and how will it work? Primarily it is designed to help ensure the independence and integrity of *The Journal* by acting as a buffer between *The Journal* and the Society, which, to all intents and purposes, comprises three main parties, namely, the Society's Council, the Society's directors and the Society's members and fellows. In a case of disagreement between *The Journal* and one of the parties, the editorial advisory board could be asked to look into the disagreement and pass comment on whether or not the editor or editorial staff had acted reasonably.

Members of the Society, members of Council and directors of the Society could all ask the board to comment on issues. Similarly, the editor could ask the board to comment if one of the parties had, in his or her view, interfered in editorial decision-making.

### Arbitrate

Terms of reference for the board are outlined in Panel 1. These are based on widely recognised principles of good journalism set out in Panel 2. The board's independent existence means that there is now a body that can arbitrate when there have been allegations of interference in editorial processes or accusations of editorial bias. It will be the visible face of *The Journal's* editorial independence. There will, however, be no obligation on the editor to seek the board's permission or approval before making a decision on whether to publish an item or to decline to publish an item.

The editorial advisory board will have an external chairman with editorial experience and an understanding of the issues involved. Niall Dickson, chief executive of the King's Fund and former social affairs editor at the BBC, has agreed to take this on. He is to be supported by three pharmacists: Noel Baumber, independent community pharmacist, Soraya Dhillon, head of the new school of pharmacy at the University of Hertfordshire, and Steve Wicks, head of research and development at Pfizer. The fifth member of the board is Tim Albert, a former journalist and editor who, since 1990, has run a training company specialising in teaching editing and writing skills to doctors, pharmacists and other health professionals. He is also a member of the council of the Committee on Publication Ethics. (The Committee on Publication Ethics — [www.publicationethics.org.uk](http://www.publicationethics.org.uk) — was formed in 1997. Its major objective is to provide a sounding board for editors who are struggling with how best to deal with possible breaches of research and publication ethics.)

We envisage that most of the deliberations of the board will be carried out electronically. However, there will be at least one board meeting a year when issues will be discussed in public. The editor and at least two members of the editorial staff will attend this meeting, and two representatives of the Society's branch and regional network will be invited to attend as observers.

The editorial advisory board will have a preliminary meeting in April when it will be invited to decide how it wishes to be approached.

We expect that it will agree that, in the first instance, correspondents or aggrieved parties should take up their complaint with the editor and editorial staff. If they are not satisfied with the outcome, they should then send the complaint to the board. Tim Albert Associates (TAA) has agreed to handle the administration of these complaints so that they remain completely separate from *The Journal*.

TAA will acknowledge receipt of the complaint, ask *The Journal* to provide any information about the handling of the complaint, ask the complainant to amplify any details if appropriate and then forward the information to members of the board for comment. The formal process will be agreed in April and contact details published thereafter. There is also some expectation that the process may be revised after the first year, since *The Journal's* staff and the editorial advisory board are both working in previously uncharted territory.

Although *The Journal* would be happy to continue as it has done in the past, confident that the decisions it makes preserve its integrity, pharmacy is a more complicated place than it was, say, 20 years ago and the pharmaceutical political arena is becoming ever more challenging. The existence of this new advisory editorial board should do much to assure *The Journal's* continued editorial independence.

## Panel 2: Principles of good journalism

- To be accurate in the reporting of stories
- To tell the truth to the best of our knowledge and ability
- To place stories in context and to be open and honest in the way that news is gathered
- To be fair and to give the opportunity for both parties to an issue to comment, and to treat interviewees fairly
- To acknowledge mistakes and print corrections immediately
- To reflect the interests and opinions of all pharmacists
- To publish comment or articles anonymously only when the interests of the whole profession are served by protecting the author, not because the individual wants anonymity
- To ensure that factual information in opinion columns and editorials follows the same standards of accuracy that are expected in news stories
- To have the confidence to reject stories and opinion pieces — whoever presents the information — if we are not sure that the pieces are accurate and truthful
- To maintain the important distinction between advertising and news so readers are not confused and business interests never influence news coverage