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What about hunter-gatherers?

Did the authors of a recent report on "refrigerator blindness"¹ consider that men, as hunters, are programmed to spot moving game, whereas women, as gatherers, are programmed to spot stationary edible plants and fruit?

Just a thought.

John Fisher
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Doubts about lutein

I found it amusing that in the same issue in which one of *CMAJ*'s editors educated Steve Arshinoff about the journal's new conflict of interest policy,^{1,2} there is a rambling opinion piece by Sylvia Santosa and Peter Jones on the possible benefits of lutein in the eye.³ I know the journal's policy had not taken effect at the time of submission, but I feel I must respond to the article.

To date, there has been no convincing research to show lutein supplementation to be of any real use in age-re-

lated macular degeneration. The evidence that lutein can slow the progression of cataracts is spotty at best, as demonstrated by the articles that are cited in this piece. The first reference is a review article,⁵ albeit of the data mined from the Beaver Dam Eye Study. Although the scope and size of the Beaver Dam Eye Study are laudable, it was not really a prospective study from which causality could be established. The nutritional information in the study was gathered using questionnaires, which are always subject to recall and compliance biases. The Beaver Dam Eye Study also suffered from "multiple looks": relationships were investigated for any and all possible population factors. The bottom line is that even though a role for lutein in treating age-related macular degeneration and cataracts was suggested in these two references, the studies don't demonstrate a cause-and-effect relationship. Plausibility is an important criterion for causality but it is not a sufficient one.

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Competing interests: None declared.

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[The authors respond:]

We agree that there is no strong research that directly examines the protective role of lutein in ocular disease. Although we recognize the limitations of epidemiologic evidence, we realize that such evidence may provide some insight into the potential role of

lutein in ocular disease. In addition to the article citing epidemiologic evidence that shows a potential protective effect of lutein, evidence from the NHANES (National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey) study that found no relationship was also cited. Although only randomized clinical trials would show causality, in our article we acknowledge the limitations of conducting such tightly controlled research, such as the difficulty in measuring oxidative stress in the retina. Thus, whether lutein may prevent oxidative stress in the retina remains unclear. Accordingly, we feel that our article weighs the merits and disadvantages of lutein fairly and is not strongly supportive of its role as a nutraceutical. As such, we are completely in agreement with Ari Giligson that randomized clinical trials are required to establish a more definitive position for use of the lutein as a prophylactic to ocular disease, a position that is entirely in keeping with the spirit of our article.

Sylvia Santosa

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Competing interests: None declared for Sylvia Santosa. Peter Jones is part owner of Nutritional Fundamentals for Health, a company that sells lutein as one of its products.

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News and independence

In their latest protest about editorial autonomy¹ the editors note that the CMA declined their invitation to present the association's views. Perhaps as a long-time member I might be allowed to compensate for this reticence.

The editors' opinion, as I understand it, is that they should be independent, i.e., free to "select content without interference" and not "subject to censure." In other words, they should be allowed to edit, censor and delete at their pleasure, and answer to no one.

I think it was Stanley Baldwin who

once described power without responsibility as “the traditional prerogative of the harlot,” and it seems to me, now as then, the media wield enormous power to influence opinion and thereby mould public policy, but answer to nobody for the abuse of this power.

You justify this stance by reference to a statement by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, whereby the foxes agree they alone have the right to eat the chickens, and any objection from the farmer is to be labelled a “transgression” of the right that they just gave to themselves. You then assure us that readers expect this, although it is not clear how many readers you consulted before concluding that their views are unanimous.

Finally you inform us that “the journal does not speak for the CMA.” If that be true, why does it call itself the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*? Am I the only one confused by this?

Surely most people assume that the journal does speak for the CMA, and that the owner, not the editor, has the right to control content. If an editor disagrees with this policy, the obvious remedy is to seek employment with someone whose policy she endorses, or else to publish her own journal.

My problem with your position on editorial independence is that I see no reason to believe that editors are any different. They too form professional societies designed to promote their own interests, specifically the power conferred on whoever controls the content of, *inter alia*, scientific journals. Editorials are given a patina of godlike authority by the tradition of anonymity, when for obvious reasons all other authors are required to identify themselves.

Fairness and objectivity are, as you say, central to the credibility of a reputable journal. The issue is why should we believe this can be assured by giving absolute control to editors, who are I believe also human beings with their own set of beliefs, prejudices, ambitions and personal agenda.

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?

John S. Mackay
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1. The editorial autonomy of *CMAJ* [editorial]. *CMAJ* 2006;174(1):9.

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I have seen the issue of editorial autonomy “from both sides.”¹ In my experience, adding “news” to a scientific journal makes the issue of content ownership and final authority over publication decisions related to the “news” component more difficult. With respect, I also note that the editors’ suggestion that the ICMJE’s statement on editorial independence is intended to apply to both the “scientific content” and the “news content” of a medical journal is not clearly supported by the source document quoted. My reading of that statement is that the main (if not exclusive) focus is on the scientific content. Editors, editorial boards and publishers need to establish a clear understanding about the roles (and limits of authority) of all parties, ideally in advance of controversial situations.

Doug Craig

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Canadian Journal of Anesthesia

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Anesthesiologists’ Society)

Former Board of Trustees Member

International Anesthesia Research

Society

Publisher

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Winnipeg, Man.

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1. The editorial autonomy of *CMAJ* [editorial]. 2006; 174(1):9.

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[The senior deputy editor responds:]

Stanley Baldwin’s objectionable metaphor, reputedly penned by his cousin Rudyard Kipling, was levelled not at rank-and-file journalists and their editors, but at press barons of far greater heft; to aim it at our small news department seems over-reactive. That being said, we agree that authors and editors

do carry enormous responsibility. This is one of the reasons why there are professional guidelines such as those of the ICMJE and the World Association of Medical Editors, and why reputable journalists adhere to ethical standards, as all professionals do. We emphasize, however, that there is no such thing as “responsible” journalism that does not take pains to protect itself from the influence of vested interests.

CMAJ has never, since its birth in 1911, been merely an association newsletter. It arose from the desire of Canadian physicians, under the auspices of their national association, to have a home-grown vehicle for original medical research. We are proud of that legacy, but attentive readers will know that *CMAJ* has matured into a journal of international standing and is not the mouthpiece of the CMA, if indeed it ever was.

We are not the only periodical to use the convention of unsigned lead editorials; this does not mean, however, that we do not hold ourselves accountable for their content.

To respond to Doug Craig, the inclusion of a news section in a scientific publication such as *CMAJ* does not make the question of editorial autonomy more difficult so much as more visible. Political sensitivities are sometimes more obvious in the selection, repression or reception of news articles than in the publication of “pure” research articles, even though there are plenty of examples of how political, ideological and, heaven knows, commercial interests have distorted the transmission of scientific research.

As for the applicability of the ICMJE statement (www.cmaj.ca/authors/policies.shtml) to news reporting, it seems fair to say that a situation such as the recent controversy over the Plan B story¹ was not anticipated in the original drafting of this document. But, if I understand correctly, Craig’s question seems to assume that science has a special entitlement to editorial autonomy. If that is the case, is science to be the Department of Truth in our journal, and news the Department of Prevarication?

Anne Marie Todkill
CMAJ