

Changes at CMAJ

In a conference call on Monday morning, Feb. 29, 2016, members of CMAJ's Journal Oversight Committee (JOC) were informed that the editor-in-chief (EIC) had been relieved of duty and the JOC itself disbanded — all in direct contravention of processes the CMA had put in place to protect editorial independence, and repeatedly reaffirmed.¹

Indeed, a central article of the terms of reference of the JOC reads as follows:²

The EIC can only be dismissed with a 2/3 majority vote of the CMA Board having first sought the advice of the JOC.²

By summarily terminating the employ of the EIC and simultaneously disbanding JOC, the CMA has efficiently circumvented and ignored its own due process.

Almost a decade earlier, when CMAJ Editor John Hoey was dismissed (exposing the CMA to worldwide criticism), the prominent jurist Richard Pound chaired a committee that recommended governance mechanisms to ensure editorial independence of the CMAJ and any future editors. A key recommendation was the creation of a journal oversight committee to act as a buffer between editor and owner:³

The Panel recommends that a Journal Oversight Committee ... be used to resolve issues that may arise ... between the EIC and the Owner or Publisher of the CMAJ. Issues that cannot be resolved by the JOC shall be determined by the CMA Board, having considered and afforded deference to the recommendations made by the JOC.³

CMAJ's oversight committee included outside experts in research, journal editing, practice, peer review and journalism: a former editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, an original member of the Pound Commission, a member from the research community, a professor of journalism and a practising generalist physician — a cross-section of experience on

which the EIC could rely for support, criticism and direction.

Over the past 2 years, the JOC has been warning the CMA of the dangers inherent in making CMAJ and its EIC primarily accountable to the newly minted business arm of the CMA, currently referred to as NewCo, and to its chief executive officer. Current events confirm how dysfunctional this forced marriage had become, and how true is the old saw that those who do not learn from history will be forced to relive it.

The JOC was not consulted about the impending dismissal, a clear abuse of process and of the terms under which its members had agreed to serve. It was a shocking breach of faith with the JOC that utterly disregarded the governance provisions of the Pound report, which had been accepted by the CMA. In an Orwellian piece of logic, the CMA, having summarily dismissed the editor and the committee put in place to protect editorial independence, then asserted that it was strengthening and reaffirming editorial independence: in a news release, it disingenuously impugned the quality of the CMAJ, pledging to create a world-class journal, which, it implied, the CMAJ, despite all evidence to the contrary, was not.⁴ Equally disingenuously, it suggested that one of the reasons for the decision was the decline in submissions and citations — a complex issue that had its roots in a variety of factors, most of which predated the current EIC's time in office.

There is an irony here. So successful were the recommendations of the Pound report that they were adopted beyond our borders, most notably by the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, whose protections for its editor are now stronger than those extant at the CMA.

The JOC believes CMA members have been badly served by this set of decisions, which turn the clock back to the turmoil and questionable Board practices that led to the creation of the JOC nearly a decade ago.

The absence, going forward, of independent oversight at the journal

leaves it, and its next editor, exposed to the pressures of profitability. Such pressures can affect editorial independence in a myriad of subtle, and not so subtle ways, and would have no forum for objective review. CMA members should be concerned. They had a world-class journal. What remains?

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Until recently, John Wootton was Chair of CMAJ's Journal Oversight Committee (JOC). The other signatories to this letter were also members of the JOC.

References

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2. Working Group on Governance and Accountability of the CMAJ. 2014. Available: www.cmaj.ca/site/pdfs/Report-Governance-Accountability-CMAJ.pdf (accessed 2016 Mar. 7).
3. CMAJ Governance Review Panel. Final Report. Available: www.cmaj.ca/site/pdfs/Governance-ReviewPanel.pdf (accessed 2016 Mar. 7).
4. CMA Board of Directors announces restructuring and modernization plan for CMAJ. Available: www.cma.ca/En/Pages/cma-board-of-directors-announces-restructuring-and-modernization-plan-for-the-cma-journal.aspx (accessed 2016 Mar. 7).

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CMAJ was just beginning to regain credibility with researchers following turbulent times a decade ago, and the recent "curious decisions" will necessitate restarting the process.¹

It will take many years for CMAJ to regain its lustre, and while it is treading water, other leading journals will continue to pull ahead. The CMA will be rightly criticized for its myopic approach, which diminishes the stature of CMAJ and buffets it with the whims of seemingly unaccountable individuals. At a time when Canadian academic medicine is under substantial pressure, and there is a