

## Norwegian editor's exit sparks alarm

A leadership shuffle at the *Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association* (*Tidsskrift for Den Norske Legeforening*) has raised questions about the editorial independence of the publication.

After 13 years at the helm of *Tidsskrift*, Dr. Charlotte Haug resigned as editor-in-chief on Feb. 10. She left with just four days' public notice, citing a disagreement with the journal's owner, the Norwegian Medical Association, over how to adapt the journal to the digital age.

In a Feb. 6 statement, Haug explained that she and journal owners had clashed over the "terms and implementation of such a reorganization, including the management, operation and administration of the journal."

Editors-in-chief at six top medical journals individually wrote the association to protest Haug's resignation, including Dr. Virginia Barbour, *PLoS Medicine*; Dr. Howard Bauchner, *JAMA*; Dr. Jeffrey Drazen, *New England Journal of Medicine*; Dr. Fiona Godlee, *BMJ*; Dr. Richard Horton, the *Lancet*; and Dr. Christine Laine, *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

Drazen said Haug's international peers were shocked that the Norwegian Medical Association seemed to be forcing her resignation without the due process necessary to safeguard the journal's independence. "It's very hard to get rid of an editor in this way and make it appear as if you haven't been trying to manipulate the publication process."

He likens Haug's sudden departure to the controversial firing of former *Medical Journal of Australia* editor Dr. Annette Katelaris in 2012. "It had to do with problems that were claimed to be within the office, but Annette thought they also had a bias against some of the things she had been publishing."

In his letter, Drazen warned the Norwegian Medical Association against



Courtesy of Charlotte Haug

**The departure of the head of a Norwegian journal has brought its independence into question.**

inflicting the same blow to the credibility of its journal. "Forcing [Haug] to resign over internal office politics would cast a negative shadow over the association and the *Tidsskrift* that would be impossible to overcome."

That shadow is long given Haug's track record of excellence and standing in medical journalism organizations, including as vice-chair of the Committee on Publication Ethics.

In her letter to the Norwegian association, Laine acknowledged the difficulty of transitioning from "an entirely print world to one in which readers expect immediate access." Even so, "*Tidsskrift* has gained great respect during Dr. Haug's tenure and her excellent work that has kept the journal relevant," wrote Laine.

According to Dr. Are Brean, now acting editor-in-chief of *Tidsskrift*, the journal is governed according to the Norwegian Redaktørplakaten, an agreement between media owners and edi-

tors dating back to 1953. The agreement affirms editors' independence, but obliges them to resign in cases of "irreconcilable conflict" with owners.

*Tidsskrift* is also expected to follow international standards set by the World Association of Medical Editors and the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. These both require "substantial reasons" for firing editors, and a process of dismissal based on evaluations by a panel of independent experts, "rather than a small number of executives of the owning organization."

For example, the Canadian Medical Association has an independent journal oversight committee which must be consulted in any decision to fire the editor-in-chief of *CMAJ*. Such a decision also requires a two-thirds majority vote by the association's board of directors, which currently has 26 members.

"These two governance procedures ensure that there's due process and quite a lot of consensus and thought," says Dr. John Fletcher, *CMAJ* editor-in-chief. "I don't know whether the Norwegian Medical Association has followed good practice or not, but it doesn't appear that they have, and for the journal's brand and credibility, appearance matters as much as substance."

The Norwegian Medical Association states that it did not force Haug to leave her post; rather, she resigned as a "consequence of a mutual agreement."

Brean says that he has assurance that both "national and international standards for editorial independence will continue to be respected."

However, a *Tidsskrift* associate editor was less optimistic in an email to *CMAJ*: "[Haug] was told about this on a Monday, and Friday the following week she resigned, so you may judge for yourself whether a process with a duration of two weeks is 'due' or not."

— Lauren Vogel, *CMAJ*

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