

The editing life

James Maskalyk

I like the scientific spirit — it always keeps the way beyond open.
— Walt Whitman, 1888

The line of words is a ... surgeon's probe. You wield it, and it
digs a path you follow. Soon you find yourself deep in new
territory. Is it a dead end, or have you located the real subject?
You will know tomorrow, or this time next year.
— Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*, 1989

Today is tomorrow, or so it was yesterday. I am 4 months into the year-long editorial fellowship at *CMAJ*, and I am sorry how soon it will be over. This is a rewrite of my first attempt to describe the fellowship for potential candidates. The earlier version was a description of a typical day at *CMAJ*, a day reviewing manuscripts, working with authors, brainstorming with editors about issues to address in the Commentary section and with the news team about events to report, and discussing ways to fine-tune *eCMAJ*, our on-line face. This much took me to the end of a Tuesday morning.

But, although a day-in-the-life approach might convey why the *CMAJ* Editorial Fellowship is interesting, it doesn't quite capture why it is important. The merits of this fellowship run deeper than the varied challenges that fill an average day and transcend the insight into scientific publication that it affords. Reading the exhortations of editorial fellows before me,¹⁻⁴ I think this has been true for each of us, and that for each it has provided something different.

Allow me to share a *CMAJ* secret. Some of our most important readers are imaginary. One of the most discerning among them practises family medicine in Wawa, Ont. She is the busy mother of 2 and practises evidence-based medicine. She enjoys her work and is interested in her profession and how it fits into our health care system. She is responsible to her patients and struggles to find the elusive balance between medicine and life outside it. She reads widely and is curious about the world.

We speak of "the Wawa factor" often when we are trying to decide about a submission or a change to the journal. And, in a similar way, we speak of other readers with an inclination to curiosity and inquiry. Some are in medical school or residency, or a rural clinic in a developing country, or the operating theatre of an academic hospital. No matter where they are, they are engaged with medicine and with the world.

This careful, continuous evocation of *CMAJ*'s reader is necessary for the journal to respond to the changing needs of physicians across Canada. Witnessing and participating in the effort necessary to maintain a national forum to advance medical science, encourage thought and allow debate has given me a deeper appreciation of medicine across our broad country.

The author Leo Roston once wrote, "If you don't know where a road leads, it sure as hell will take you there." Be assured that this fellowship will take you to different territory — different from what you expected, and different from that explored by your predecessors. What you will do on the road, however, will be similar. You will be asked to broaden your knowledge of medical issues. You will read widely, write on topics that interest you, and solicit commentaries and opinions from experts. You will assess manuscripts for scientific and clinical merit and, by the end of the year, gain a deeper understanding of epidemiology and scientific rigour. You will have an intimate knowledge of the processes of medical journal publishing and be better able to write manuscripts of your own. You will work with the on-line team to make *eCMAJ* easier to use. You will be exposed to aspects of medicine that you never had occasion to ponder before. And, perhaps, you will better understand why we physicians do what we do. You might even learn where Wawa is.

The other day, serendipitously, I found some notes I had written in preparation for the fellowship interview. Attempting to describe my hopes for the year, I had noted, "the fellowship will increase my understanding of medical publishing, epidemiology and the practice of medicine across our country." Already, it has done all three. No doubt there are other things, but I might not know until this time next year.

I encourage prospective applicants to peruse the articles and profiles of previous Editorial Fellows available at www.cmaj.ca/misc/fellowship.shtml. There you will also find descriptions of fellowship activities and details of the application process. If you are considering the editing life, submit your curriculum vitae, a letter describing your interest and any materials that might supplement your application (e.g., writing samples) by Dec. 31, 2002, to Dr. John Hoey, Editor, *CMAJ*, 1867 Alta Vista Dr., Ottawa ON K1G 3Y6. You may also contact me at james.maskalyk@cma.ca.

Dr. Maskalyk is the fifth editorial fellow at *CMAJ*. He returns to Toronto next year to finish his residency in emergency medicine.

References

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