

Introducing *CMAJ's* Readers' Advisory Panel

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Every 2 weeks, the pace quickens at *CMAJ's* editorial offices as we put the finishing touches on another issue of the journal and send it off to our printing company and to HighWire Press, the host of the online journal. A while later the issue reaches the mail slots and computer screens of *CMAJ's* readers. The issue may create ripples of interest or annoyance, but the ripples don't often lap against our offices.

Readers provide feedback to the authors of the articles we publish through letters to the editor; they critique elements of researchers' work or raise points that authors neglected to address. With some exceptions,¹ however, readers rarely provide feedback directed at the editorial staff.

The World Association of Medical Editors has stated that "editorial decisions should be based mainly on the validity of the work and its importance to readers, not the commercial success of the journal."² James Maskalyk, our 2002–2003 Editorial Fellow, noted that the "careful, continuous evocation of *CMAJ's* reader is necessary for the journal to respond to the changing needs of physicians across Canada."³ With these thoughts in mind, last year we decided that we needed to do a better job of soliciting feedback from our readers. In March 2002 we invited 24 readers to join a Readers' Advisory Panel. We chose the initial group of panellists from among a group of people who had already demonstrated an interest in the journal by writing a letter to the editor in the previous 2 years. We selected readers to ensure representation in both primary and specialty care, and we were particularly interested in including people who worked in community rather than academic settings to provide a counterpoint to the experience of most of our associate editors and Editorial Board members. We invited medical students, practising physicians and retirees to join the panel, in an effort to include people with a wide range of years of experience in medicine.

Of the readers we selected, 5 declined our invitation. The 19 readers who agreed to participate are listed in Box 1. We have asked them to serve a 3-year term on the panel, with the possibility of renewal, and they will be invited to attend meetings of our Editorial Board in Ottawa on a rotating basis. So far we have asked the panellists to critique

an issue of the journal, to comment on the changes we have made to *CMAJ's* News section over the past 3 years, to suggest topics for our Public Health column, to provide feedback on *CMAJ's* objectives⁴ and to advise us about whether we should keep our current cover format or switch to either a full-page illustration or a more complete listing of the table of contents without an illustration.

The panel is making the job of evoking our reader a bit easier, just as we had hoped. For example, one panellist commented, "I do not like the full-cover illustration concept for regular use... My life is very busy. When I receive a journal I immediately scan the contents if [they are] on the cover. If the contents are not on the cover, the publication is put away until such time as I get to it. I must admit, sometimes I never get to it, and potentially miss an article that may be important to my practice." Feedback from the panel is influencing the discussions around our editorial table; we are putting more effort into soliciting good-quality review articles and commissioning illustrations from professional medical illustrators, partly because panellists told us that they find review articles particularly valuable and they encouraged us to improve our graphics.

We thank the panellists for volunteering their time to help us improve the journal and we look forward to more gentle and not-so-gentle comments from them in the future. We encourage other *CMAJ* readers who may be interested in joining the panel to contact us.

Ms. Thomas is Deputy Editor (Scientific) and Dr. Hoey is Editor of *CMAJ*.

Box 1: *CMAJ's* Readers' Advisory Panel

Shabbhir Alibhai, Toronto, Ont.
 Francesco Anello, Cambridge, Ont.
 Alan Bell, Thornhill, Ont.
 Timothy Best, Sault Ste. Marie, Ont.
 Madeleine Cole, Toronto, Ont.
 Robert Colistro, Surrey, BC
 Lance De Foa, Wawa, Ont.
 Stephanie Ensworth, Vancouver, BC
 Gavin Greenfield, Calgary, Alta.
 Michelle Greiver, Toronto, Ont.
 Brian Higgins, Toronto, Ont.
 Frank Jackson, Edmonton, Alta.
 Christopher Milburn, Kingston, Ont.
 Lloyd Oppel, Vancouver, BC
 Allan Patrick, Fredericton, NB
 Daniel Roth, Edmonton, Alta.
 Rachelle Sender, Hamilton, Ont.
 Colin Stevenson, Kingston, Ont.
 Cornelius Woelk, Winkler, Man.

References

1. Unwanted results: the ethics of controversial research [editorial]. *CMAJ* 2003;169(2):93.
2. World Association of Medical Editors. Editorial Independence. Posted 2000 June 19. Available: www.wame.org/wamestunt.htm (accessed 2003 Aug 22).
3. Maskalyk J. The editing life [editorial]. *CMAJ* 2002;167(11):1252.
4. Hoey J, Todkill AM. Why a Journal Oversight Committee? [editorial]. *CMAJ* 2003;168(3):287.

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