

EDITORIAL

Conflicts between Professional Associations and Their Journals Strike at the Heart of Professionalism

While *CJNR* is an independent, academic journal not affiliated with a professional association, the rift between several professional associations and their official journals should be of concern to all. This rift is indicative of a fault line in a system that has been in place for almost a century, a system whose purpose has been to safeguard the role of professions within society and to ensure the highest standards of professionalism.

Many have been concerned about the growing crisis of professionalism in North America. There is mounting evidence that the public has lost faith and confidence in the professions, eyeing them with suspicion and cynicism. The professions are now perceived as serving their own self-interests rather than the public interest.

Sullivan (2005) attributes the public disillusionment with professions to a violation of the social contract. His thesis is as follows. A social contract was drawn up between the professions and society. Professions had services that only they could provide. These services required specialized knowledge and skills acquired through years of formal education and training, extensive experience, and mandatory continuing education. Professionals were expected to meet the highest standards of competent, ethical practice and to always act in the "public good." In exchange, society accorded professions status and respect and remunerated them well for services rendered. It also gave them autonomy and the authority to control entry into their profession, monitor and regulate their members, set direction for the profession, and create structures to safeguard the public.

Over a century ago, a system was developed to fulfil this contract. The system consisted of two interdependent bodies, the professional association and the professional journal. The primary responsibility of the association was to govern the profession, whereas the role of the professional journal was to provide the association's members with access to the latest information in the field. These two bodies formed an important partnership. Each supported the other's mission while serving, at arm's length, as a check and balance to the other's power.

While the system functioned relatively smoothly for decades, there have always been tensions between the two bodies. In recent years there have been a number of well-publicized rifts between professional associations and their journals. When the various cases are viewed together, the pattern that emerges is indeed troubling.

In 1999 the Massachusetts Medical Society (MMS) fired Dr. Jerome P. Kassirer, editor of its official journal, the *New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)*. This incident was followed by the firing by the American Medical Association (AMA) of Dr. George Lundberg, editor of its official publication, the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*. These firings sent shockwaves through the scientific community. The commercialization of medicine and editorial interference were cited as reasons for the breakdown (Hoey, 1999; Parmley, 2000). Seven years later, in 2006, two more journals became embroiled in conflict with their associations. I refer to the recent firing by the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) of Dr. John Hoey, editor of the *Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ)*, and the decision by the American Nurses Association (ANA) to sever its ties with the *American Journal of Nursing (AJN)*.

The recent termination, in February of 2006, of Dr. Hoey and senior *CMAJ* deputy editor Ann Marie Todkill calls into question a journal's editorial autonomy and its independence from the interests and dictates of the professional association with which it is affiliated (see Godlee, 2006; Shuchman & Redelmeier, 2006, Suzuki, 2006; Webster, 2006). Dr. Hoey's contract was not renewed after the *CMAJ* published, over the objections of the Canadian Pharmacists Association and the CMA, an investigative item on pharmacists' efforts to restrict access by Canadian women to the Plan B emergency contraceptive. A few weeks later, ANA's board decided to "drop" the *AJN* as its official journal and to establish a new journal that would be distributed to its membership, thus ending a century-long relationship.

When these events were made public, the response was quick, the outrage great, and the ripples far-reaching. Clearly, more was at stake than the firing of editors and the disaffiliation of professional journals. The conflicts suggested a loss of integrity and a lowering of ethical standards. E-mails flew across cyberspace on the listservs of the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) and the International Academy of Nursing Editors (INANE). Journals around the world rushed to prepare editorials on the subject. The events were reported in newspapers and on network television. In response to the Hoey firing, the CMA established a commission, headed by a retired Supreme Court judge, to make recommendations on the journal's future governance.

In the case of the *AJN*, nurse editors around the world expressed their consternation in a letter to the ANA (see www.inane.vcu.edu).

Why have there been such strong, visceral reactions to these cases? Many believe that associations are being driven by greed, the “bottom line,” at the expense of professional considerations and the public good.

The official journals of some professional medical associations have become cash cows (Hoey, 1999). Journals with high impact factors have translated their prestige into high subscription rates and large advertising revenues. With minimal investment, associations have reaped great profits. (Case in point: the *NEJM* brings the MMS revenues of over \$20 million annually [Hoey].) In the past 15 years, professional journals have become a marketable commodity. It was this very issue that caused the rift at the *NEJM*. The MMS board saw an opportunity to “brand” the *NEJM* by creating other imprints bearing its logo. When Dr. Kassirer requested that, as *NEJM* editor, he be given some responsibility for the quality of these new imprints, he was turned down and his contract terminated. The fact that the Canadian Pharmacists Association was involved in the *CMAJ* issue raises the possibility that commercial considerations played a role, directly or indirectly. The ANA has stated that its decision to drop the *AJN* as its official journal was based on business considerations.

For some time now, there has been growing scepticism about the ability of professional associations to monitor themselves. New structures have been created to serve as “watchdogs.” Journal editors have formed associations (WAME and INANE) and have published editorials alerting their members to the existence of dangerous practices. They have established committees to develop guidelines for improving the quality of scientific papers and to ensure that authors and editors meet the highest standards of ethical conduct. They stand on guard for signs of interference with editorial independence or violations of the principles of scientific publishing. When seeking to publish their work, researchers monitor the scientific and scholarly standards of journals and make their decisions accordingly. Clinicians look to many new sources for reliable and credible information rather than depend solely on “official” journals. The public have assumed greater responsibility for their own care, demanding to be treated as partners instead of as passive recipients. Interest groups monitor the professions and have become powerful lobbyists. They have found a voice in numbers and have become key drivers of the research agenda and essential sources of credible information. Foundations are and always have been valued partners of professional bodies. A case in point is the Preparation for the Profession Program of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. This program has committed large amounts of money to the study of professions, including nursing, with a view to developing a new system to address the crisis of professionalism.

Until the issues eroding professionalism are better understood and a new social contract between professions and society is drawn up, we can expect to see more rifts between professional associations and their journals. These rifts should be seen as symptoms of serious malfunctioning. During this period of breakdown and transition, as we await the emergence of a new system, we must be prepared to defend the integrity of our professions and to safeguard the public good. We all have a role to play.

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