



Editors discuss Lundberg firing as *CMAJ* hosts meeting

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The widely publicized and highly controversial firing of Dr. George Lundberg as editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* resulted in the creation of a new Journal Oversight Committee to handle disputes between the AMA's editorial and administrative wings. Established by the AMA and a journal search committee in response to Lundberg's mid-January firing, the 7-member committee will evaluate the editor's performance, serve as a buffer between the editor and AMA management, and "foster objective consideration of the inevitable issues that arise between a journal and its parent body."¹

The new committee and the implications it holds for other journals was one of many topics discussed when the world's top medical editors — including Dr. Richard Glass of *JAMA* — met in Ottawa May 26-27, with *CMAJ* playing host. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, better known as the Vancouver Group, was formed 20 years ago to set editorial standards for the world's medical journals. It includes representatives from 12 of the world's leading journals, the National Library of Medicine and Princeton University.

The new *JAMA* oversight committee was of particular interest to the group because it emphasized the issue of editorial freedom. Glass, an interim coeditor at *JAMA*, said the outcry after Lundberg's firing highlighted medical journals' importance to society and the issue of editorial independence. Under the new governance plan, the editor-in-chief has editorial autonomy and reports to the AMA only for business- and administration-related activities.

Any proposal to dismiss the editor has to be voted on by the oversight committee and approved by at least two-thirds of AMA board members. The new committee includes a member of AMA senior management, a member from outside the AMA with publishing expertise, and 5 members representing the scientific, editorial, peer-reviewer, contributor and medical communities.

The new committee worries many Vancouver Group members, with some arguing that it is better to leave the editor's relationship to the supporting association vague. "The more explicit you are, the more likely [a firing] is to happen," said Dr. Marcia Angell of the *New England Journal of Medicine*. "The biggest protection here is vagueness."

At the moment, the *British Medical Journals* surveying 35 journal editors about their editorial freedom, governance models, editorial pressures and policies on hiring and firing.

The editors also dealt with a range of issues surrounding



CMAJ Editor-in-Chief John Hoey orders with editors (from left) Richard Glass (*JAMA*), Caralee Caplan (*CMAJ*) and Richard Horton (*Lancet*).

medical publishing. Of particular concern to editors of non-English-language journals was the problem of secondary publication. In some cases, the larger English-language journals refuse to publish articles that have appeared previously in another language. This can be a barrier to wide dissemination of important results and can lead to problems in the assignment of copyright.

Dr. Frank Davidoff, editor-in-chief at the *Annals of Internal Medicine* summarized results of the recent Council of Biology Editors conference on authorship. Although Vancouver Group criteria for authorship exist, they are not yet widely used; many scientists continue to feel that work is being misappropriated, often to the detriment of younger, lesser known researchers. Davidoff emphasized the need for journals to collect information on contributorship, to develop a taxonomy for citing contributions and to pursue actively research in this area.

Dr. Ken Flegel, an associate editor at *CMAJ*, and Davidoff led a discussion on the issue of ethnicity. The genetic differences between the races are becoming less and less apparent, they explained, and race is more often a confounder than the real source of difference between groups. The Vancouver Group plans to develop a policy on reporting ethnicity in biomedical research.

The most hotly debated topic at the meeting was a proposal by Dr. Harold Varmus, director of the National Institutes of Health, to create an electronic repository for all biomedical research. Details of Varmus' "E-biomed" proposal and the Vancouver Group's take on the initiative are discussed in this issue (page 41-2); a statement by the Vancouver Group will be sent to Varmus.



Reference

1. Rosenberg RN, Anderson ER Jr. Editorial governance of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* report. *JAMA* 1999;281(23):2239.