

CMAJ's youngest-ever editor dies

Dr. Gordon Dickinson, who was handed the editorial reins at *CMAJ* in 1965 when he was only 33 years old, died suddenly at his Toronto home Aug. 4, 2015. He was 82.

Dickinson graduated from McGill in 1958 and was appointed editor of *CMAJ* in December 1965, becoming the youngest physician to hold the post since the journal was launched in 1911. Prior to his appointment, he had served as the journal's associate editor since October 1959.

"I remember that he was hired as associate editor by Dr. Stanley Gilder less than two years after graduating from McGill," recalled his ex-wife, Mary Lou Dickinson. "I also know that he loved the work at *CMAJ*. He always said his job was to help the articles say what they needed to say — he took the editing process very seriously."

Dickinson worked at the journal while it — and the CMA headquarters — were located in Toronto. He resigned as editor in 1969, the same year CMA staff began moving to the association's new headquarters in Ottawa. By June 1971, *CMAJ* and its staff were also located in Ottawa.

Mary Lou Dickinson said there was some debate about the impact the move would have on the journal. "The CMA was making the move to Ottawa because it was the political capital of Canada," she said. However, by leaving Toronto, *CMAJ* would also be leaving the country's leading centre of medical research. "There was some debate about that," she recalls.

Gordon Dickinson's decade at the journal marked the only time in its history that it published weekly, a process that began in 1960 and ended with his departure in 1969, when twice-monthly publication resumed. Despite the many deadlines associated with weekly publication, Dickinson managed to complete

a master's degree in philosophy at the University of Toronto in 1962. "Although married to medicine, Gordon Dickinson's mistress is philosophy," *CMAJ* noted upon his departure.



Courtesy of CMAJ

Dr. Gordon Dickinson was editor of *CMAJ* in the mid '60s when it was published weekly.

During his years at the journal he witnessed many major changes in medicine, from the impact of the birth-control pill to the growing concern about the terrific health impact of smoking. One of his first issues of *CMAJ* as associate editor (Jan. 2, 1960) contained a review of a film, *The Medical Effects of the Atomic Bomb*: "Recommended for all professional and scientific audiences (doctors, dentists) . . . and also of value for mature and intelligent adult audiences when presented in a controlled manner by proper authorities."

In his final year, 1969, the journal covered topics ranging from "crib death" to *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia, the latter a topic that would soon rocket from obscurity because of the arrival of AIDS.

After leaving *CMAJ*, Dickinson spent two years as a stockbroker. Following that hiatus he returned to medicine, earning a fellowship in psychiatry and certification in psychoanalysis.

In a eulogy delivered at Dickinson's funeral, Mark Sherman commented that his father-in-law's editorial instincts were always on display. Years ago they were discussing a news item, which hypothesized that Napoleon "had suffered from long-term covert arsenic poisoning" while languishing in exile in Elba. "Gord, while unaware of the newspaper article, had an answer," Sherman recalled. "He said that as long as there existed no opportunity to test the null hypothesis — namely, that Napoleon hadn't been poisoned — then all such articles would forever remain in the speculative realm and hence held no interest for him."

When he resigned from *CMAJ* 45 years ago, the editors made a similar observation. "His keen analytic mind can discern unerringly the merits and shortcomings of a piece of investigation, an ethical viewpoint, or a solution to an administrative difficulty. . . . From this has come his high sense of responsibility as editor to present to his readership only what is trustworthy and significant, and to suppress the fallacious, the ephemeral and the meretricious."

Dickinson is survived by his children Andrea Dickinson, Phil Dickinson and Thea Dickinson, two grandchildren, ex-wife Mary Lou Dickinson, and Joanne Sulman, the mother of Thea Dickinson. — Patrick Sullivan, Ottawa

CMAJ 2015. DOI:10.1503/cmaj.109-5157

More News online

To read more *CMAJ* news articles, visit cmaj.ca/site/home/news.xhtml