

Conflict of Interest for Editor: Sweet and Sad Choices

*We look before and after,
And pine for what is not:
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.*

"To a skylark" by Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

On June 4, 2009, I was elected Dean of the University of Split School of Medicine, to take office at October 1, 2009. Since the University of Split School of Medicine is one of the 4 owners of the *Croatian Medical Journal (CMJ)*, I have found myself in an awkward position of becoming the owner of the journal I edit. To resolve this conflict of interest, I will take a leave of absence from the position of the editor during my service as the dean. The following is the story of how I came to make both a sweet and a sad decision after 17 years of my editorial life.

THE FOUNDERS

My dream as an academic was to create in Croatia a good journal which would present the medical research in the region. This dream came true with the start of the war in 1991 (1). As I was active researcher in immunology at the time, my initial idea was to help create a journal but, to my surprise, nobody wanted to be its editor. The dean at that time, Prof. Mate Granić, talked me into taking the position and promised to take care of the finances, and I talked him into joining as the co-editor. Prof. Granić soon went into politics to become the vice-president of the Croatian government, did not have time to take care of the journal finances, and stepped down after a year (2). The journal survived in the middle of the war and continued its growth with the support and dedication of many colleagues in the country and abroad (1).

THE EDITORS

In 1994, upon the wise insisting of the *CMJ*'s Editorial Board member Prof. Eduard Klain, Prof. Ana Marušić became the co-editor in chief (3) and brought prosper-

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ity to the journal in its every aspect. As a volunteer copy-editor, desk-top editor, field worker (1991 was the time of war), peace-worker, anatomist, and co-editor, she took over the international relations of the journal and turned it into a respected international publication. Some called the *CMJ* "Marušić's Publishing" to poke fun at the husband and wife working as co-editors (plus my brother Joško Marušić, the artist who made our first cover design and our Christmas cards, ref. 4), forgetting that our work was, and still is, fully volunteer.

THE OWNERS

The *CMJ* used an author-helpful policy to build up a critical mass of researchers with skills in responsible research, data presentation, and research communication in Croatia and other emerging and developing countries (5-7). The journal became the door for them to join the global scientific community and the window for the global science to see good research from the so called "scientific periphery" (8).

The *CMJ* was started as a volunteer effort of a group of academics, without any framework for its official functioning. Learning from the experiences of editors of large and influential journals who lost their editorial positions defending editorial independence (3), we constructed the legal framework of the journal, naming all 4 medical schools in Croatia as the *CMJ*'s owners and ensuring the independence of the journal (9). The choice of medical schools for journal owners was logical because the journal's primary function was, and has remained, that of education and training in the academic and research community (5,6).

OWNERS AND EDITORS

During the last 2 years, we have informed the readers about our efforts to protect editorial freedom in the *CMJ* against the leadership of the Zagreb University School of Medicine, which tried to discredit both the journal and its editors and change the legal framework of the journal to abolish editorial independence and introduce control of the journal by the deans (3,10-12). The conflict with the Zagreb School of Medicine had its origin in our persistence in practicing

international publication and research integrity standards (13), and culminated when the journal investigated possible duplicate publications by Prof. Asim Kurjak after allegations of his repeated plagiarism in the *British Medical Journal* (14). The leadership of Zagreb Medical School tried to present the *CMJ* as a low-quality journal with questionable editorial practices and dishonest editors, but this was not supported by other medical schools (3,15). The international scientific community demonstrated strong support for our work and the principle of editorial integrity (12,15-17). Contrary to the opinion of some of our colleagues that it would have been best to keep everything quiet, our view was that readers, authors, and the public have the right to know about all aspects of journal's work. This transparency helped the journal to steer safely out of threats to its integrity and high publication standards. For us as editors turned whistleblowers, the fairness came not from the colleagues in our academic and medical community but from the responsible government bodies, judiciary system, and human rights organizations (18).

THE DEAN

After successfully defending the editorial independence and the integrity of the *CMJ* (18), we decided that it would be better to channel our energy into creative work rather than into continual defense of our personal and professional integrity. We accepted a 3-year old offer from the University of Split School of Medicine to move there and help them in their strife to mature into a modern and prestigious school. I was invited to run for Dean and I am happy to say that my colleagues in Split recognized my contribution to the Medical School in the last several decades (19,20) and gave me their votes. The last few months were exciting for me and worth telling a long and thrilling story, but I will just say how I see the future of medical education in the acronym of my home town:

Students and

Professors:

Learning and

Innovating

Together.

THE FAREWELL

As a dean, I will represent one of the owners of the *CMJ*. This is a conflict of interest that cannot be just declared, it needs my reclusion from any editorial decision making in the journal. During my work as the Dean, I will

surely vest interest in the journal and I am aware that I will always have a positive "conflict" of interest in promoting high publishing standards in the *CMJ*. However, I take it as my obligation to put the interest of the journal before other possible personal or institutional interests and benefits. I am confident that the current editorial office and the editorial board will continue their excellent job. They have been doing so far anyway and my major contribution was signing all rejection letters (now at 80% of the submitted manuscripts).

THE WELCOME

Changes are always chances for further improvement, even if it is such a small change as this one. The *CMJ* started this year with a new design (5), continues now with new/old editor, and will close the year with many exciting articles. For the *CMJ* to grow and continue to be a fresh, stimulating, and innovative journal, it needs new people and new ideas in the exciting new world of communication. I am a fossil from typewriters' age and I call upon new generations. If you think you can contribute and have ideas how we answer the communication needs of the scientific community come and help the *CMJ*: show your face, digg, reddit, even twitter! And – welcome to Split; you may be surprised by the exceptional quality of its teachers and their ideas, and you may count on their cooperation and friendship.

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