

CURRENT SCIENCE

Volume 77 Number 9

10 November 1999

EDITORIAL

Editors

The last year has seen the removal of two editors of leading medical journals in the United States. First, George Lundberg of the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* was sacked for publishing expeditiously an article on a study of sexual preferences, which may have had a bearing on the Clinton impeachment trial in the US Senate. Second, Jerome Kassirer of the *New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)* lost his job in a battle over commercial exploitation of the journal's name and its pages. The major issue in both cases was – who owns and controls the journals and their contents. Floyd Bloom, Editor-in-Chief of *Science*, comments (*Science*, 1999, 285, 1207) that 'editors must be free to navigate the editorial path, but also be accountable for their journal's overall performance'. While mourning 'the distasteful and disruptive spectacle of editor-sacking' he points out that 'without editorial independence, there will be little content worthy of distillation into knowledge'. The principle that editors must be unfettered is generally accepted in the world of publishing. Editors have long tenures and often function with little of the democratic niceties that characterize the discharge of duties in other positions of responsibility. Indeed, most journals seem to function efficiently and well only under a benign editorial dictatorship. The pressures of deadlines and decision making, which invariably will invoke either the ire of authors or the wrath of referees (and sometimes readers), leave little room for collegial committees that move with a glacial pace, to an obvious conclusion. Since speed is of the essence in most editorial decision making, mistakes abound. Despite this, most science journals which cater to a wide, general audience provide a useful and invaluable source of information and opinions on rapidly changing fields of science and policy.

In the last few years *Current Science* has attempted to fill a niche in Indian science, by providing a forum for discussion of not only science but also policy and issues that concern scientists. This gradual change from a staid, technical journal to a more 'newsy' incarnation has not been without problems. We, in India, have generally been accustomed to discourse and discussion, where policies and programmes are rarely questioned in print. Indeed

many vocal critics on any scientific issue under discussion are more likely to express their views in coffee houses or private conversation, but are always loath to put pen to paper. Many of our movers and shakers are indeed bold enough to state that they will never express an opinion on paper that is contrary to what is perceived as an accepted, establishment view. Indeed, in such a climate criticism, complaints and contrary opinions are only voiced by the 'fringe', who are then brushed off as a needless annoyance. If criticism sometimes strikes too close to home, there are injured protests; with some going so far as to state that dissension and disagreement do damage to the fragile fabric of science in India.

The editor needs to tread an inevitably treacherous path, in deciding on what is eventually published and in expressing what are essentially personal views in an editorial column. Since editors tend to pontificate on subjects with which they may have only a nodding acquaintance, editorials act like a lightning rod to attract criticism from more informed readers. I was told by a well-meaning colleague recently that my editorials only touch upon issues that I have some familiarity with, to the exclusion of many pressing matters that affect science in our country. This is a just and reasonable charge and the deficiency should hopefully be rectified by guest editorials and opinion pieces which articulate reasoned views on critical matters. On page 1134 of this issue, Amulya K. N. Reddy makes a telling comment on this journal's reaction to the Pokhran explosions of May 1998: '... after an initial silence on the subject (as if it never happened) *Current Science* publicized the official/government version of the "kilotonnes yield" of the test bombs but rejected/ suppressed estimates of the hundreds of thousands of innocent non-combatants who would be killed if even a primitive bomb were exploded on Mumbai/Karachi'. Pleading guilty is sometimes the best defence. The suddenness of Pokhran and the editor's inability to quickly take a position led to the initial silence. But is the editorial decision to publish the Pokhran estimates correct? I believe this was the right thing to do, because the subject was topical and only the BARC group had the best available data, although all of it

was not presumably disclosed in the paper. Should journals publish reports which withhold information either on national security grounds or because of the potential for commercial exploitation? This is an increasingly difficult question that editors must address. Was *Current Science's* rejection of the paper dealing with the effects of nuclear explosions on thickly populated cities correct? I believe so, because such estimates have been made before and widely discussed; more importantly, as pointed out by a referee, even in India several decades ago, the problem was addressed by D. S. Kothari. Editors, of course, have an advantage. They do not normally have to defend their decisions on manuscripts, except in the rare cases where both published and rejected papers attract public attention. This point has been highlighted by the very recent publication in *The Lancet* of a paper on the effect of genetically modified potatoes on the growth of rats by Arpad Pusztai, whose apparently flawed experimental design has attracted the ire of the Royal Society. In the context of the raging debate on the safety of genetically modified foods the paper in *The Lancet* appears to have been shepherded through the review process because of a strong editorial position on the subject. Clearly, editorial

prejudices can cut both ways and there is a strong temptation to play to the gallery. Editors, necessarily have to steer a course between the Scylla of public passions and the Charybdis of unemotional totalling of referees' reports. An editor's primary concern must eventually be the standing of the journal that he or she produces.

Finally, why do editors write editorials? The purpose, I believe, is to provoke thought and discussion in the hope that incessant articulation of well-known problems will eventually result in reasonably successful solutions. It is really in the feedback that is received from readers that one is able to gauge the utility of a fortnightly essay. A perceptive reader recently wrote, 'Your editorials are most of the time concerned with important issues, but I have noticed that your language and presentation is changing towards somewhat non-serious journalism'. He went on to add that 'sombre articulation may be better'. While this may be construed as sharp criticism, I suspect that it might in fact, be a well disguised, if unintentional, compliment. Good humour, even in editors, may be a virtue. It is important not to take oneself too seriously.

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