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Canadian researchers respond to CMAJ crisis

Several more editors of the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* have left their posts, as the fallout from the sacking of the journal's two top editors continues. Canadian researchers are reacting to the crisis by launching plans for a new open-access journal to rival CMAJ. Paul Webster reports.

Eight senior and intermediate editors of the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, along with 16 of the 19 members of the journal's editorial board, have resigned to protest the February 20 firing of editor-in-chief John Hoey and senior deputy editor Ann Marie Todkill. Numerous Canadian researchers say they want the firings explained, and will withhold submissions to CMAJ unless the Canadian Medical Association (CMA), which represents 62 000 Canadian physicians, justifies its actions.

The highest-profile member of the journal's editorial board, Alan Bernstein, President of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, which coordinates US\$750 million worth of public research budgets across Canada, became the latest defector when he quit on March 21.

Hoey and Todkill received a personal boost 2 days later when a December, 2005, CMAJ investigative news story they published regarding pharmacists' efforts to restrict Canadian women's access to the Plan B emergency contraceptive was nominated for a Michener Award, Canada's most prestigious journalistic award.

The Plan B story was printed despite opposition from the Canadian Pharmacists Association, and the CMA. Shortly before they were fired, Hoey and Todkill charged the CMA with forcing changes to the story that violated international guidelines designed to protect medical editors from political and commercial interference.

The two dismissed editors have been unable to answer questions about whether the CMA's broadside was warranted due to a confidentiality agreement which the Association insisted they recently sign. But in a

forum with students at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, on March 30, Hoey and Todkill said they had not been provided with reasons to explain their terminations.

During Hoey's decade-long tenure at CMAJ the journal's scientific impact increased five-fold, placing it among the world's five leading medical journals. These gains were achieved in the face of numerous skirmishes with the CMA over editorial independence and commercial strategy.

The CMAJ editors had been required to defend their policy since 1999 of maintaining free on-line access to the journal's contents after the CMA decided to focus on "maximising revenues" in 2004, when Graham Morris, a magazine and internet industry veteran, took control of the journal as president of CMA Media.

Under Morris's guidance, the CMAJ's business status shifted from a non-profit to a for-profit basis when the CMA sold the journal for US\$3.4 million to Canadian Medical Association Holdings, a private company owned by the Association, in December, 2004.

3 weeks after the CMA sold the journal to its holding company, which largely focuses on managing US\$16 billion worth of pension funds and which generates cash flow of US\$700 million, the CMAJ editors pledged to maintain its open-access status in an unsigned editorial.

But several CMAJ editors who resigned after Hoey and Todkill were fired believe the long-term survival of the journal is threatened by the CMA's actions.

In Vancouver, Anita Palepu, an epidemiologist who studies HIV patterns among intravenous drug users, and who had served as a part time editor since 1998, says the firings will damage the journal in the long term.

"The CMA has eviscerated the full-time editors. I don't think the CMA understood what it was doing, and I don't think the journal will be what it was."

In Toronto, Steven Shumak, an internal medicine specialist at Sunnybrook and Women's College Health Sciences Centre, says he resigned his position as a CMAJ section editor for similar reasons.

"I feel no compelling reason to do pro bono research for a CMA mouthpiece", says Shumak. "The sense I have is that the journal as it currently exists can't maintain its scientific productivity. They've just alienated a big part of the community."

Senior medical researchers across Canada who have relied on the CMAJ to publish recent studies have also reacted with shock.

In Montreal, Sandra Dial, director of respiratory medicine at McGill University, who recently published research in CMAJ on an outbreak of *Clostridium difficile* that killed 200 patients in Quebec hospitals, says the journal has played an important role "highlighting Canadian research on

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CMAJ's news article on emergency contraception has been nominated for an award

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The *CMAJ* fast tracked crucial research articles during the SARS crisis

Canadian health issues. Having a high impact journal come from Canada does wonders for recognition of Canadian researchers and Canadian research."

Dial worries the timing of the controversy "is particularly bad as the journal was rising steeply in terms of impact—which in turn made us more likely to choose to send our research there".

In Toronto, Leslie Nickell, an associate professor in the Department of Family Medicine at the University of Toronto who recently published a study of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) impacts on hospital workers, says the *CMAJ* was willing to fast-track the article to publication during a SARS outbreak that killed 44 in Toronto in 2003.

Nickell says the entire research community is alarmed. "A journal of this calibre has to have independent rigorous editing", she says.

At McMaster University, clinical epidemiologist Gordon Guyatt announced on March 29 that he and 11 collaborators on a two-phase series of *CMAJ* articles on evidence-based medicine would withhold the second phase of papers until the CMA justifies firing Hoey and Todkill. "There are many other researchers who will have nothing to do with the *CMAJ* unless

they get an explanation", says Guyatt.

Several former members of the *CMAJ* board say discussion is growing of launching an independent journal modelled on six open-access journals launched by the Public Library of Science, a San Francisco-based non-profit publisher.

In Saskatchewan, Stephen Lewis, a specialist on public access to medical services, says the time may have come to challenge the CMA's ownership of Canada's only major medical journal. "You can either see medical journals as commercial or scientific enterprises", say Lewis. "But perhaps not both. We want the CMA to come to its senses."

At the CMA, president Collins-Nakai says the Association has drafted interim guidelines, published on March 7, guaranteeing that acting editor Noni MacDonald will have full editorial independence, and will report to CMA Media President Graham Morris "for matters that pertain only to business and financial operations".

The CMA has also commissioned a retired Canadian supreme court judge, Antonio Lamer, to make recommendations regarding reforms to the journal's governance.

Although Collins-Nakai says the CMA has not agreed to be bound by

Judge Lamer's recommendations, she insists the journal will continue to flourish. "We're committed to going forward and not talking about the past", Collins-Nakai said from Ottawa.

Noni MacDonald, a Nova Scotia paediatrician, has agreed to step in as acting editor until a permanent replacement for Hoey can be found. Two earlier replacements resigned, one citing concerns over independence.

Before agreeing to serve as interim editor, MacDonald served on the Journal's Oversight Committee, which has been criticised in a commentary published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, by former editorial-board member Don Redelmeier, for failing to protect editorial independence.

MacDonald told *The Lancet* she agreed to do the job to save the journal. "I also have a full-time job apart from this one", she says ruefully.

According to MacDonald, the controversy has been fuelled by "explosive anger". "We're still getting very high quality stuff coming in", she says, while describing the Lamer report as an effort to "buy time" while the dust settles. MacDonald said a new editorial board, a new oversight committee, and new editors are being rapidly recruited.

In a *CMAJ* commentary published March 16 explaining her decision to step in as acting editor to replace Hoey and Todkill, MacDonald said she "suspects that all the events surrounding their removal will not be revealed, perhaps, for a very long time".

"One certainly doesn't let someone go without having consulted extensively with your lawyers and being sure you have a pretty bona fide case", says MacDonald. "I don't think this was done in a rush. This is not the kind of organisation that does rushed stuff."

"Some change was going to happen anyways", she says.

Paul Webster