



SAMJ: A journal in transition

Medical journals don't come cheaply. *The New Zealand Medical Journal* went out of hard copy business as a result of costs, continuing life in a more ethereal electronic form. *SAMJ* readers usually take it at face value, oblivious to battles behind the scenes, but our journal has faced its fair share of pleasures and pains over the past few years. Since members of SAMA consider the *SAMJ* to be one of the main benefits of membership and because of recent significant changes, it seemed a good time to reflect on some of the more important of these, not always visible to the reader.

Cash is king

When the baby boomers were graduating as doctors there was effectively no opposition to the *SAMJ*. It was a cash cow for the Association. However, an increasing number of journals, often of little value to the profession but of commercial benefit to their owners, eroded the advertising support base. To compensate, Peter Roberts, then Head of Publishing, toiled mightily and with some success to develop new publications to boost revenue.

Despite the efforts to turn the publishing operation around financially, it kept declining. Apart from the increased competition another potent factor was the bureaucratic bungling resulting from a professional association trying to direct a commercial enterprise about which it understood little and had less competence in handling.

Desperate efforts to stem the financial bleeding included the following. Page charges were introduced, with authors being asked to pay for the privilege of seeing themselves in print. Whittling away the number of pages of scientific content reduced printing costs. SAMA was requested to provide a subvention to cover the difference between costs and income of *SAMJ* and *CME*, the key journals in the publishing stable. Further cost cutting and restructuring of the Pretoria office included the reduction and dilution of the activities of the advertising sales team, including assigning them other responsibilities, a sure recipe for losing advertising traction.

Facts and figures showed repeatedly and convincingly that business as usual was leading to oblivion. The publishing group responded by searching for viable alternative models and came up with the proposal of an 'Independent Business Unit' that would have the freedom to apply sound commercial principles to the publishing operations. Perhaps because SAMA's main focus was its own transitional turmoil, resulting from the merger of former opposition associations and its financial crisis, it took 2½ years of negotiations and persuasion to establish the present company, owned by SAMA and partnered on a commercial basis by a successful larger publishing group, Cape Media. At 9 months, the time from human conception to birth, all indications are that the previous prolonged labour was a prelude to rapid and satisfying growth.

Advertising and the politics of publishing

Most publications in the world and their editors steer a precarious path between the demands of their owners and the need to maintain editorial independence, which is essential for the credibility of their journals. The *SAMJ* has previously reflected on the damaging interference of the Medical Association in usurping the authority of the editor by determining what could be published about matters of political significance, such as the death in detention of Steve Biko.

Recently the *SAMJ* was challenged about its advertisements for overseas posts for doctors. The origin of this was a reaction by a medical tabloid that was concerned about the threat to its advertising wellbeing by the revitalised *SAMJ*. However, we took the question seriously as it raises important potential ethical issues. The image and reputation of SAMA in seeming to support emigration by doctors by advertising posts abroad while publicly expressing contradictory views is one side of the coin. On the other side are constitutional issues concerning freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom of movement, freedom to pursue commercial self-interest, and so on.

With the thrust to increase advertising revenue, another challenge has been pressure to accept advertisements of products with dubious credibility. The arguments in favour of accepting such material are increased revenue, the presence of a disclaimer in the journal, and the fact that we service an audience capable of discriminating between good and bad products. The editors argued that they should handle questions relating to the journals themselves; they would not accept advertisements of products with unsubstantiated claims and did not believe that it was their role to placate government.

Enter the electronic age

The wizardry of electronic means of communication, including e-mail and the Internet, has revolutionised the world by greatly increasing access to information. Wide access to the *SAMJ* includes the following: SAMA website; PubMed (also via Google – click on EntrezPubMed); and AJOL (African Journals Online).

We trust that readers recognise good editorial and good business policies and practices in the *SAMJ*.

J P de V van Niekerk
Deputy Editor

