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The earth is flat, as are our journals and CPD

The earth is flat. Thomas Friedman derives the title of his bestseller book *The Earth is Flat: A Short History of the 21st Century* from the expression 'a flat playing field', denoting a competitive environment where teams compete on equal terms. He addresses the astonishing growth of communications and spread of knowledge through the development of computers, email, the Internet, etc. The stock market IT boom and collapse of the start of this century in the USA ironically gave a massive fillip to countries such as India and China. A sobering message for the USA and Africa is the importance of the education and work ethic of the peoples of the East. Their graduates are now returning to their home countries from the USA and elsewhere because of improved opportunities.

What has this to do with our journals and CPD?
Everything – but first let's look at where we have come from!

The SAMJ then and now

The first *South African Medical Journal* was published in East London on 19 January 1884. The founding editor was Dr William Darley-Hartley, who played a subsequent prominent role in organised medicine in South Africa. Medical politics then were much the same as now – fees, dispensing, government versus doctors, etc. After some hiccups the SAMJ developed into a respected and internationally recognised general medical journal. At first it had the field all to itself and it did not matter whether this was flat or tilted. But then commercial publications appeared and specialist journals proliferated to provide for the needs of the increasing numbers of specialists, providing new and tough competition. Not long ago the publishing division of SAMA was costing SAMA membership some R3 million per year – still good value, but a hefty sum nevertheless. It became apparent that a hard focus and a more business-like and professional publishing approach were essential for successful survival. After much patience and persuasion the Health and Medical Publishing Group (HMPG) was established as an independent company though wholly owned by SAMA. An alliance was formed with Cape Media, a successful publishing group, to ensure a competitive critical mass on the production and advertising sales side. This has resulted in an impressive turnaround in just a few years with profits in sight.

From paper to electrons

For authors, editors and readers, however, we were still in the equivalent of the horse and carriage era. Paper swamped everything, from submissions, through the editing process, to printing and distribution. But that all changed with the introduction early in 2007 of the 'OJS' online system (introduced to us with thanks to Pierre de Villiers). Everything is now electronic: author submissions, the editorial process

including peer review and right through to publishing are all now available via www.samj.org.za. The back issues of the SAMJ (over 100 years of leather-bound volumes!) have been scanned and are in the process of being added to the servers, when they too will become freely available!

Members will still receive their copies of the SAMJ in the post, but our reach internationally will be significantly enhanced. Receipt of journals is a significant membership benefit, but the journal distribution has also been in need of an overhaul. Henceforth members will be entitled to receive up to three different journals and to subscribe to others in our stable at low cost. All will receive the SAMJ, specialists will receive a specialist journal if we publish in their field, and there is a choice of a third.

Paperless CPD

The electronic advances will also impact on the CPD programmes offered by our journals. Benefits will be much enhanced for most users, but we regret that some will be disadvantaged. The CPD programmes will be available online immediately, and paper replies will not be accepted beyond the February 2008 issue. Advantages will include instant response on success or otherwise, ability to print the required certificate immediately, the provision of answers after 2 months, and access to CPD programmes of several journals other than SAMJ and CME. (Early additions are to be the *SA Journal of Child Health*, *SAJOG* and *SAJBL* – see below). Disadvantages are that faxing answer sheets will no longer be possible, and that readers will not be able to answer CPD questions many months later because the answers will be online. A wag has suggested that some of us oldies who do not have computer capacities will have to enlist the aid of our grandchildren. CPD will be available through the journals or the website www.cpdonline.org.za

CPD ethics points

Partly in response to needs expressed by members, ethics points required by the HPCSA will be available via a new journal planned for production in 2008. *The South African Journal of Bioethics and Law (SAJBL)* will be published online and the bi-annual issues will both carry CPD questions that will cover members' needs. This journal may be accessed via www.sajbl.org.za (also for authors who wish to publish in this field).

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