



Editorial

Journals and Causes

What are the functions of journals? Why are you reading this piece? These are questions all editors should ask. The answer on one hand appears simple: to disseminate knowledge by publishing high quality scientific papers. Yet many medical journals have other agendas which may be obscure to readers outside the regular subscribers. Some of the most prestigious are organs of societies or organisations, for instance the *British Medical Journal* of the British Medical Association and the *New England Journal of Medicine* of the Massachusetts Medical Society.

Public Health started in 1888 as the publication of the Association of the Medical Officers of Health which then became the Society of Community Medicine and finally the Society of Public Health. This merged with the Royal Institute of Public Health and Hygiene (RIPHH) in October 1997. It is therefore produced partly for the benefit of members of the merged organisation. The RIPHH has a multi-disciplinary membership and has an important function to educate and examine and to promote public health to a wider audience. This is where a publication may be used to further causes—banning smoking, improving environmental targets such as air pollution, standards of housing—the list is endless. Many of these have a political dimension and it would be wrong to ignore these as too controversial. Food safety has long been a crusade for the RIPHH which has responded at length to the government about the establishment of the Food Standards Agency (FSA). I would like to pay tribute to the recently retired Secretary of the Institute, Group Captain Roger Smith, who has done much to improve the educational standards of the organisation and to point out in the responses on the FSA that education is the core to food safety.

Should a journal such as this be more active politically? As I write this piece the electronic news group of the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) is buzzing with the news of the dismissal of George Lundberg as editor-in-chief of *JAMA*, the organ of the American Medical Association, for publishing an article on a sensitive subject. The article was on taking a sexual history and would have passed unnoticed in a specialist journal and even in *JAMA* were it not that it coincided with the trial of President Clinton. How you define 'sex' is more than of academic interest. Whatever the rights and wrongs of this sacking—and the situation may have changed by the time this is printed—it raises the question of the role of the journal and how to sack an editor. In a bimonthly publication such as this it is difficult to be immediate whereas the weeklies have already commented on this **cause célèbre**.

The area of important crusading for us should be those issues highlighted by the New Public Health Agenda—which is really 'Proper Public Health' as recognised by our predecessors. Those include the social and environmental determinants of health and how we can narrow the gap between those living in poverty and the rest of the population. In particular, we can explore specific areas where a small cost or change in legislation might achieve considerable benefit. I can think of two topics in particular: affordable warmth and monitoring of carbon monoxide in domestic properties. I am sure there are many others and I welcome contributions as leading articles on these issues—they cause illness and are worthy political causes.

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Editor