

Nurse Author & Editor

Leslie H. Nicoll, PhD, MBA, RN, FAAN Editor-in-Chief

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Editorial Independence and the Society Editor

Editorial Independence and the Society Editor

Jan Odom-Forren

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The subject of editorial independence is discussed often when editors meet—whether the journal affiliation is with a society or owner-publisher. Editors with society journals have specific hazards as they maintain editorial independence. The society boards have been known to push for crossing the editorial independence line—whether misguided or not. Possibilities include the society board campaigning for certain members as part of the editorial advisory board; advocating for specific individuals as guest editors; or asking the editors to publish inappropriate manuscripts from industry when money for the society budget is on the line. Past society editors have discussed society boards who wanted the editor

to waive having peer review for manuscripts from a “famous” author or from society board members or society boards who wanted to fill the editorial advisory board—and not necessarily with qualified persons. Professional organizations may want information published because of a financial relationship with industry or the Board of Directors may attempt to influence content. Editors with more experience are typically able to manage being “bullied” or “pushed around” by the society and know how to draw the line. But newer editors or those intimidated by the society may not know how to respond.

WHAT IS EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE?

Editorial independence is critical to the integrity of the journal (Mason, 2006). The World Association of Medical Editors (WAME), Council of Science Editors (CSE), and International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICJME) assert that editorial freedom requires that editors have “full authority over the entire editorial content of their journal...” (WAME, 2009; CSE, 2012; ICMJE, 2016). Their recommendations on editorial freedom include the freedom for editors to express critical but responsible views about all aspects of medicine without fear of retribution. Both editor organizations point out the importance of independence from industry influence with editors’ approving ads that are placed in the journals and determining appropriate conflict of interest statements. Editorial independence means that editors are free to evaluate content, to determine timing of publication, to publish a critical but responsible view without retribution, to select the editorial board, and to be free from industry influence. On the other hand, owners (societies, publishers) can dismiss editors, but dismissal should be for substantial reasons, such as scientific misconduct, failure to perform based on objective criteria, or inappropriate behavior, e.g. criminal activity. Guidelines suggest dismissal after evaluation by an objective panel of experts to prevent dismissal for reasons linked to editorial independence only. Publishers also have statements of editorial independence. For example, the Elsevier statement on editorial

independence emphasizes their adherence to “intellectual freedom and editorial independence” and separation of editorial decision making from the commercial aspects of the business (Elsevier, 2017).

Society conflicts with editorial independences have occurred. Most notably, the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* has twice dismissed editors leading to concern from the scientific community. In 2006, Dr. J. Hoey was dismissed without cause after an editorial critical of the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) for censuring a report regarding difficulties of obtaining Plan B drugs from pharmacists. Then again in 2016, CMA fired the editor and the Journal Oversight Board that had been put into place in 2006 to prevent this type of occurrence from happening again. The end result was damage to the credibility of the journal and worry regarding lack of separation of content and membership affairs with no plausible justification for dismissal of the editor (Kelsall et al., 2016; Kassirer, 2016).

ETHICAL DISTRESS

In a survey describing editorial independence in medical journals owned by professional associations, Davis and Müllner (2002) found that 23 of 33 editors stated they had complete editorial control, while 10 felt pressure from the organization. In a survey of 88 nursing editors, Freda and Kearney (2005) found that 56 of the 88 editors had faced an ethical dilemma. Of the eight categories of ethical issues found, the most frequent issue was problems with the association/society/publisher. Examples provided by the study participants were publishing controversial topics, resisting dictates from society members, and dismissing editorial board members. Pressure concerning advertising for the journal was the second most listed topic. This could include articles submitted that were sponsored by industry or those that promoted a product, or advertisers who wanted feature articles to appear with product advertisement. Of interest, some

editors believed they faced an ethical dilemma when determining whether to publish articles that might be seen as inflammatory, such as those with a political view. Other concerns were duplicate publication and plagiarism, difficult interactions with authors, and authorship.

NURSING EDITORS AS GATEKEEPERS

As early as 1997, Blancett described nursing editors as the “gatekeepers of nursing knowledge” (p. 16). She based that description on the fact that nursing editors are responsible for submission, development and publication of scientific knowledge pertaining to the profession. It is beyond the scope of this article to describe in detail the many tasks that comprise the editor’s role. Blancett (1997), however, discusses those technical tasks in detail and points to two personality characteristics important to an editor: a love of reading and grasp of English grammar, composition, and spelling. Beyond the technical tasks of editing, the nurse editor is a nursing leader which requires excellent communication skills and an ability to see the profession with a broader lens.

HAZARDS OF EDITORIALS

In one study, nursing editors agreed that two of the most important aspects of their roles were to maintain scientific and editorial quality and provide vision and direction for the profession (Kearney & Freda, 2006). One way that nursing editors can fulfill that role is with editorial opinions written as the voice for the profession. Interestingly, there has been little written about nursing editors and the editorials they publish. So it is really unknown as to whether most journal editors associated with societies write editorials that are narrow in scope to the specialty or whether the editorial can take a broader view of the nursing profession or healthcare as a whole. My latest interest in editorial independence came about as I received a letter to the editor from a society member unhappy that I had broached the issue

of “gun control” in our society journal (Odom-Forren, 2016). This reader did not believe our nursing journal was the appropriate venue for the subject. I had purposely not used the term “gun control,” but instead focused on “gun violence” as a public health issue. To respond to the letter, I searched for information that might be helpful to explain editorial independence to our members as well as others who may read the response.

As editors of a society journal, we do walk a tightrope with editorials on controversial topics. For example, most nursing societies are a 501(c)3 non-profit organization, and that alone limits the political discussion from “political campaign activity” or, in other words, support or opposition to a particular candidate (IRS, 2016). However, a society editor can still advocate voting in elections, educate members about the issues, and update members on how the nursing profession relates to an election.

Editorials are probably fraught with the most hazards associated with editorial independence. Mundane editorials on publishing in the journal or the latest nursing report typically cause no angst, but also provide no debate or discourse. When writing an editorial for a society journal do we present a narrow perspective or a broader perspective when needed so that we do provide that voice for the profession? Recommendations for editors suggest that we have leeway to provide discourse that might even be against society issues. In 1855, Wakely, who founded and was editor of *Lancet* wrote an editorial about factory workers who were polluting London....”reeking in putrid grease, redolent of stinking bones, fresh from seething heaps of stercoraceous deposits” (p. 634). Wakely (1855) was looking at health through a broad lens and wrote without mincing words.

PREVENTION OF CONFLICT

Various editorial organizations have suggested guidelines that will work to prevent conflicts in the area of editorial independence. WAME (2009) suggests that editors should have conditions of employment in writing, including authority, responsibilities, reporting relationships and how to resolve conflicts. The policy on editorial freedom should be shared with readers. That is why most of us have a statement that opinions expressed by the editor do not represent the publisher or society views. CSE (2012) suggests that societies and editors should have a signed contract to detail editorial independence and other responsibilities of the editor. CSE goes on to state that the contract should include the editor's duties, job description and performance measurements and a mechanism for resolving conflicts. ICJME (2016) suggests that editors seek input from reviewers, editorial staff, editorial board and readers to support decisions and any controversial editorials. My co-editor and I of our society journal share the decision to publish and then give a "heads up" to society leadership when we believe an editorial or article may cause some controversy. Using this approach, we have had no problems to date with editorial independence.

Editorial independence is a privilege that gives the editor the liberty to publish an opinion, not only on specific specialty or nursing issues, but on significant social and political issues (Kassirer, 2016). Societies should allow their journals to be a platform for debate on issues that pertain to the specialty or profession. This provides a forum to highlight opposing views and displays an openness to discourse by the organization (Michael, 2015). As I said in my response to the author of the letter to the editor, "Only through debate and discourse are relevant ideas promulgated and promoted, and importantly, relevant change initiated" (Odom-Forren, 2017, p. 4).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jan Odom-Forren PhD, RN, CPAN, FAAN, is Co-Editor , *Journal of PeriAnesthesia Nursing* and Associate Professor at the University of Kentucky College of Nursing in Lexington, Kentucky. Contact Jan by e-mail:

Jan.Forren@uky.edu.

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