

CMAJ editors dismissed amid calls for more editorial freedom

Two Canadian editors have been dismissed in what their publisher claims was a decision to bring a “fresh approach” to their journal. But members of the journal’s editorial board say the move is a veiled attempt to forcibly align the journal’s views with those of its owner. Paul Webster reports.

See [Editorial](#) page 704

Tensions over editorial independence at the *Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ)*, Canada’s pre-eminent medical research journal, came to a head on Feb 20 when editor John Hoey and senior deputy editor Anne Marie Todkill were dismissed without notice.

Speaking from her home in Ottawa, Todkill told *The Lancet* she and Hoey have been advised not to comment publicly on the situation.

Both editors had been with the biweekly journal for more than a decade and had won praise for expanding the CMAJ’s readership to 70 000, while improving its international reputation and impact factor.

The troubles at the journal were well-known: in an editorial published in early January this year, Hoey complained his editorial independence was compromised when a CMA executive insisted that an article on access to emergency contraception be redrafted following complaints from the Canadian Pharmacists Association.

In his complaint, Hoey noted that the CMAJ website publishes guidelines from the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) stipulating that journal owners “should not interfere in the evaluation, selection or editing of individual articles”. In a letter written shortly before she was dismissed and published in the journal on Feb 28, Todkill argued that the CMAJ “is not the mouthpiece of the CMA”.

Graham Morris, President of the CMA’s media division, says the dispute over editorial independence at the CMAJ was not a factor in his decision to dismiss Hoey and Todkill.

“I felt it was time for a fresh approach”, says Morris, adding that he fully supports editorial independence, although he believes “the last call will be my call” in disputes over content.

Morris says his decision was taken without consulting the journal’s editorial board or oversight committee—an organisation created to protect the journal from “undue influence by its publisher and owner”.

A week after Hoey and Todkill were dismissed, the CMA said a statement had yet to be drafted regarding the role of the journal’s oversight committee in the affair. The CMA also said it was still considering whether or not to release the oversight committee’s guidelines.

Some members of the journal’s editorial board have rejected the CMA’s explanation that the decision to abruptly fire Hoey and Todkill was warranted for business reasons entirely unrelated to editorial matters.

Donald Redelmeier, Senior Scientist with the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences in Toronto, noted that Morris expressed no concerns to the editorial board about a need to change editors at a meeting of the editorial board last autumn.

“Customarily we organise more tranquil succession timing”, Redelmeier says. “This makes it difficult for some of my colleagues to know what to think when they’re submitting papers for publication.”

The recent friction over editorial independence is part of a pattern: in a letter published in November, 2002, Redelmeier and 19 other members of the journal’s editorial board described actions taken by Dana Hanson, the then-President of the CMA, who demanded Hoey retract an already-published editorial, as “a threat to the editorial independence of the journal”.

After the dispute in December over the article on emergency contraceptive pills, Hoey commissioned an

external review by Tufts University medical professor Jerome Kassirer, a former CMAJ editorial board member and a former editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Kassirer says his review—submitted to Hoey just days before he was fired—found a violation of the ICMJE’s guidelines.

Kassirer notes Hoey and Todkill were dismissed amid a fresh dispute over a news article on health politics in Canada. The article was published on the journal’s website on Feb 7, 2006, and then retracted, amended to include commentary from the current CMA president Ruth Collins-Nakai, and republished online on Feb 24.

While the earlier version of the story included critical analysis of Canada’s new Conservative health minister Tony Clement’s track record as a provincial health minister, much of this was replaced with praise for the new minister in the revised version.

The CMA advocates reforms to the Canadian medical system including expansion of private delivery of health-care services where it may be “better, faster and cheaper to deliver health care privately within the publicly-funded system”. Tony Clement has also indicated support for this view, which many public-health advocates oppose.

Michael McBane, President of the Canadian Health Coalition, which opposes privatisation of medical services, worries the CMA may want to use the journal to disseminate views matching those of a growing number of Canadian physicians who support reforms allowing physicians to expand private health-care opportunities. Such reforms could dramatically increase physicians’ incomes.

Paul Webster