

Send your letters to the editor, British Dental Journal, 64 Wimpole Street, London W1G 8YS or by email to [bdj@bda.org](mailto:bdj@bda.org).

Priority will be given to letters less than 500 words long. Letters should be typed. Authors must sign the letter, which may be edited for reasons of space



## Editorial control

Sir, we, the co-signatories, are all either Scientific Advisors or members of the International Editorial Board of the *British Dental Journal*. As such, our role is to safeguard the interests of the readers of the *BDJ* and of the BDA membership, and to maintain the highest scientific and professional standards for our journal.

We appreciate that the BDA's £2million shortfall, as yet unexplained satisfactorily to the membership, means that difficult decisions have to be taken. However, the need for speed and efficiency does not justify what appears to have been a lack of consultation with those who have the necessary knowledge and experience of running the UK's premier dental journal.

The BDA has decided to pass on the family silver to a third party. The profit making 125-year old *BDJ* has not been sold as such, it appears to have been given away in exchange for a loan to meet short term needs. However, as anyone working in publishing knows, the issue is not who owns the title (the BDA retains ownership) but who exercises editorial control. It is this crucial element that has been given away.

We are very concerned for the future. The full time BDA appointed Editor is to be replaced by an ill-defined (initially 2-days per month, now perhaps up to a 'maximum of 2-days per week') Editor-in-Chief who, it is said, will oversee the editorial staff appointed by and contracted to Nature Publishing Group (NPG). Mike Grace and some of the non-clinical BDA appointed editorial team are being made redundant, whilst others have already moved to work for NPG.

The effectiveness of an Editor depends on building a variety of networks. These represent access to expertise from clinicians, teachers, dental politicians, specialist societies, researchers, authors, traders, editors of other journals from the UK and overseas, referees and advisors. The *BDJ* receives in excess of 400 manuscripts per year which, at the very least, must be read by the Editor-in-Chief to ensure maintenance of publishing standards. Of course, the Editor-in-Chief's responsibilities will extend well beyond just reading manuscripts and will include management of all BDA publications and journals including the web site. We feel that a new Editor-in-Chief will be unable to fulfil this heavy workload and will have limited ability

to influence an editorial staff employed by a publishing house and not the BDA. Whether by default or by intent, the new arrangements will leave NPG with editorial control of the *BDJ*.

It is disconcerting that the deal struck behind closed doors is being presented as advantageous to the profession. If this is such a good deal, why was it not done long ago and what precisely do NPG stand to gain in return for their investment? Let us not forget, among other possible benefits to NPG, that in the current climate of 'free open access' to scientific literature, publishers are anxious to capture guaranteed markets such as professional journals included within membership subscriptions.

Our concerns about recent events are sadly not unique. As recently as 10th July 2004, the *British Medical Journal* devoted its editorial to 'Editorial Independence' and the former highly respected Editor of the *BMJ*, Richard Smith, expressed his hopes and aspirations for his successor in securing maximal editorial independence under the BMA's new arrangements for the *BMJ*.

We wish to place on record that none of the recent changes have been carried out in consultation with the Editorial Board or with our consent. It is very likely that several of us see this as a resignation issue and will make our own decisions in the coming weeks.

The future of the *BDJ* as an authoritative clinical and scientific journal is under serious threat. The changes will only become apparent in 12-18 months as the clinical and scientific contents are prepared many months before publication. Sadly, beyond this, the future looks bleak – and all for the sake of a short-term fix.

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**Chief Executive of the BDA, Ian Wylie, responds:** 'Editorial independence is a space in editors' heads, a complex function of their personality, courage, power and the pressures they feel ...'. So wrote the outgoing editor of the *BMJ*, Dr Richard Smith, in a *BMJ* editorial in July. The above gloomy letter sits unhappily against such an insight, and uneasily with anyone who knows Dr Stephen Hancocks, the new Editor-in-Chief of the *BDJ* and the editorial team at Nature

Publishing Group. Dr Hancocks has enjoyed a superb career in dental journals, working with both former editors of the *BDJ*, Dame Margaret Seward and Dr Mike Grace. As *BDJ* commissioning editor and as a contributor, adviser and senior member of the *BDJ* and *BDA*, Stephen Hancocks brings to his new role, experience of dental journal and book publishing at the highest international level. Add to this, thorough scientific rigor, independence, and knowledge of the professional, political and commercial spheres of dentistry, and no-one is better placed to take over the leadership of the *BDJ* from Mike Grace.

Stephen Hancocks and the editorial team will safeguard the interests of readers of the *BDJ* and will enhance the independence and scientific and professional standards of the journal.

The changes that have been made to the *BDJ* over the past few months are straightforward business decisions, made daily by successful academic publishing houses throughout the world. In agreeing these changes with Nature Publishing Group, the BDA has built on this successful partnership and adopted a management system that runs some of the world's finest clinical and scientific journals. In truth, it is probably a model that we should have adopted several years ago.

Far from being rushed, these management discussions continued throughout the summer and decisions about the changes were taken in open meetings of the BDA's Executive Board and ratified at the BDA's Representative Body meeting in October. Both of our senior academic directors, Professor Elizabeth Kay and Dr John Drummond, were consulted at an early stage and both supported these moves.

It is intriguing to see that our correspondents believe that Richard Smith's editorial in the *BMJ* supports their view. It does nothing of the sort. The former editor of the *BMJ* wrote to praise the BMA for safeguarding his editorial freedom and for ensuring the editorial integrity of the *BMJ* for his successor.

The *BMJ* editor suggested a 'scrutiny committee', and a review of the advisory structure may be something that our new *BDJ* Editor-in-Chief undertakes.

Ultimately what really matters, through changes of editor, advisors and business arrangements, is whether the *BDJ* works for its readers. That, and that alone, should be our focus.

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