

Closure of the *Irish Medical Journal*

In an editorial in this year's January issue of the *Irish Medical Journal*¹ I wrote: "A Golden Jubilee is an occasion on which to look back, to recall the good days with modest pride and to cast a critical eye on the follies of youth lest their repetition in later years inhibit maturation or bring about a premature senescence". Little did I think at the time of writing that greater follies were to bring about the premature demise of the *Irish Medical Journal* at the end of its fiftieth year.

As editor of a journal which was growing in academic stature due primarily to the improving standard of scientific research in Ireland and also to the guidance of a succession of editors, I am greatly saddened by this occurrence; as a doctor, I am ashamed of the behaviour of certain members of the profession who have been able to influence an apathetic and ambivalent administration of the Irish Medical Organisation (IMO), into precipitant acceptance of the Journal's closure; as a journalist, I am dismayed that a cherished principle has been violated, namely, freedom of expression; as an Irishman, I am concerned that the implications of the closure, which is receiving no small amount of attention in journalistic and academic circles abroad, will have far-reaching and detrimental effects on our hard-earned international reputation in medicine. I am reassured by the volume of support that has been voiced for the Journal and its editorial policies, but the distorted reports on the reasons for the Journal's abrupt termination, demand explanation and the facts, however disagreeable, must therefore be laid down.

One reason put forward by the IMO for the closure of the Journal is that it was simply losing money. Publishing is a competitive and complex business and the members of the Publishing Unit of the IMO who are responsible for publication of the *Irish Medical News* and the *Irish Medical Journal*, had neither the expertise nor experience necessary to manage publication of a weekly and a monthly periodical. This is not to detract from the goodwill and energetic endeavour of these officers, but the Unit failed to draw on the advice of those members of its staff who did have experience in publishing, preferring instead to issue directives through Council that often failed to take account of practical considerations.

Surely the greatest folly must have been dispensing with the services of a business manager half-way through 1987. The immediate result of this decision was a dramatic reduction in advertising revenue for the latter part of the year,

and this undoubtedly contributed substantially to the loss of the £60,000 which the Journal is said to have incurred this year. The IMO, in analysing its financial losses would do well to bear in mind that the *Irish Medical Journal* was once financially sound, and that the *Irish Medical News* attracted away from the Journal much of its advertising income. The IMO must be realistic about attributing to loss what is in effect a service and, therefore, subject to pricing. There were two ways in which the IMO might have provided the Journal to its members; it could have charged each member with the Journal at a subsidised cost of, say £10 per annum, or it could have provided it 'free' as part of its service to members, but in so doing an agreed fee should have been offset against the cost of publication. In either event the exercise would have put the Journal into profit.

So much for the financial explanation for closing the Journal. Unfortunately, the real reason, for terminating its publication has far more serious connotations. Certain members of the profession, mostly non-consultant hospital doctors, did not like the views I expressed in an editorial entitled "Strike and the Medical Profession" published in the September issue.² Rather than expressing their disapproval in the correspondence columns as would be the practice of any civilised member of a democratic society, they effected, by means, which if not irregular, at least smacked of a curious deviousness of purpose, the passing of a motion to close the Journal at the Annual General Meeting of the IMO in Kilkenny in October 1987.

The story, however, goes back further than this event alone suggests. I belong to a school of thought that finds strike action unacceptable in medicine. I have clearly stated this view on previous occasions.²⁻⁴ When I first wrote against strike in the *British Medical Journal* in 1978,³ I was surprised at the reaction from non-consultant hospital doctors. In fact, the anger that my sentiments caused in 1978 were still strongly in evidence five years later, when in 1983 my application for the post of editor of the *Irish Medical Journal* was effectively vetoed by a group of NCHDs. To avoid repetition of this embarrassing issue, my appointment in January 1986 was by invitation rather than by application. Members of the IMO have expressed surprise that as editor of the Journal I am not a member of the IMO, but let it be understood that when I was appointed editor it was known that I could not in

conscience, join an organisation which had the power to enforce strike action on its membership.

As a cardiologist in charge of a coronary care unit, I was well placed during the recent NCHD strike to witness first hand the consequences of withdrawal of service from the acutely ill. I was, moreover, able to assess the inadequacy of any so called "Shadow Roster" for emergency cover. Perhaps, most importantly, after balancing the immediate dangers and the potential long-term consequences of the strike for patients, against the negligible gains, if indeed there were any, from the strike, the absolute futility of the exercise prompted me to write an editorial in my capacity as a physician, not from any desire to awaken dormant animosity but rather to promote debate and hopefully make it more difficult for the profession to go down the road of strike again.

The consequences of this editorial are more serious than the regrettable closure of the Journal. What has happened is that a group of doctors, belonging to the so-called representative organisation of a liberal profession has applied censorship in a manner that differs only in its execution to the methods used by totalitarian administrations; the result, however achieved, is to obliterate freedom of expression. It is this issue of censorship that has caused such concern to the profession.⁵⁻⁷ Those who perpetrated the event are not, it is true, representative of the profession in Ireland, but the profession none-the-less has permitted this quisquilius group to rise to a position of power in the IMO so that they can effect a decision which will be detrimental to the credibility of the profession as a whole.

I make no apologies to anyone for having stated my views. I signed my name to my sentiments and I am prepared to stand over them. I do not expect everyone to agree with me. As editor, I was prepared to throw open the pages of the Journal (as the correspondence columns will testify since I became editor) to contrary views. As a physician, I am prepared to argue my point of view. I do, however, seek the forbearance of many colleagues who helped me during my two-year term as editor and also that of recent past editors, Dr. Harry Counihan and Dr. Hugh Staunton who did so much to bring the Journal to its present position of eminence. Sad though this event is, I know their efforts not to have been in vain.

A few words of explanation as to the size of the present issue are indicated. When I received a letter from the secretary of the IMO informing me that publication of the Journal would cease with the December issue, I immediately sought and obtained permission to publish all papers I had accepted for publication. To fulfil this

obligation I have had to bring six months of editorial and three to four months of scientific content together in one issue, but by so doing many authors have been saved the ignominy of having accepted papers returned to them. Regrettably some papers which were in the editing and reviewing phase, could not be pushed through the process in time and I extend to these authors my regrets as editor for this circumstance. The Christmas issue as originally planned was to have been devoted to a written debate on the health cuts, and the Journal is therefore divided into two parts, the first being the planned issue and the second consisting essentially of papers that would have graced the pages of the Journal during the first six months of 1988.

My final duty, and one that I do with pleasure, is to acknowledge a small group without whose help the *Irish Medical Journal*, under my editorship would not have achieved the high standard of accuracy and layout that I know to have been among its none too few virtues. First, there are my expert referees who help me to decide whether or not a paper is suitable for publication; without this loyal band, who give freely of their time (and the demands in reviewing a paper are often considerable), the editor of a scientific journal could not function. It had been my intention for the future to publish the names of my referees annually with the index and I am glad to be able to do so for the first, and alas last, time in this issue. The standard of typography and the accuracy achieved by the printers, Mount Salus Press, has been exemplary, and I am especially indebted to Mr. Mannix Cullinan, who has overseen the typesetting of papers with such care that my task of proof-reading and checking was much less hazardous than it might have been. Finally, I am indebted to my secretary for the past year, Pauline Keogh, who apart from coping with the sizeable correspondence generated by each paper submitted and keeping a close eye on papers as they pass along an often convoluted pathway towards publication, has also to liaise between concerned authors and the editor; for these skills and her assistance in the task of copy editing, I am indebted.

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Editor

References

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