Medical Journal Draws Lancet on Rival

JAMA calls NEJM elitist; NEJM says JAMA is misguided: gag rule is bone of contention

A definite squabble has erupted between those twin pillars of the medical research establishment, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) and the *New England Journal of Medicine* (NEJM).

The cause of the dispute is the publication policy of the *New England Journal*, whose editor seeks to discourage potential authors from sharing their findings with the press prior to publication. The latest issue of JAMA carries two editorials which describe this policy as elitist, unrealistic, and injurious to the reporting of clinical research. What may give a certain edge to the disagreement is that the two journals compete for public attention as leading oracles of new advances in medical research.

JAMA is also directly affected by its rival's policy because it carries a medical news section as well as research articles. Section editor Gail McBride complains that the "buttoned-lip syndrome" is increasingly common at research meetings: scientists refuse to discuss their unpublished research for fear that they may be banned from the pages of the NEJM.

That fear, in McBride's view, is deliberately instilled by NEJM's editor, Arnold Relman, who "does not hesitate to personally harangue medical writers who already have or are likely to transgress his recommendations. Dr. Relman would like to call the shots for all and say when it's all right to report on medical information and when it's not. . . . Are clinical investigators going to continue to allow such an unrealistic and elitist attitude to prevail?" McBride asks.

JAMA senior editor Lawrence Grouse suggests in a companion editorial that Relman's policy "has had a chilling effect on the reporting of medical news in this country."

Relman's response is that the JAMA editorials "are unfortunate because they are misinformed and misguided. They miss the underlying issue, which is the quality of scientific information."

Relman's policy grew out of the much discussed rule promulgated by his predecessor as editor, Franz Ingelfinger. Ingelfinger, who described himself as having printer's ink in his veins, wanted his journal to be firstest with the mostest, and he didn't wish to be scooped by other medical news publications. His rule was simply that, if the substance of a paper submitted to NEJM appeared elsewhere before publication, he might choose not to print it.

Relman, it would seem, has both changed and redirected this policy. His chief concern is with the quality of medical reporting in publications other than his own, particularly the popular press. His apprehension is that the public will read of alleged new medical treatments and pester their doctors for them before the doctors have had a chance to read the data in published form.

To this end Relman seeks to discourage authors of articles submitted to NEJM from discussing their findings with the press. Recently he has suggested that the abstracts of papers read at research meetings should not form the basis for articles in the popular press because of their unreliability; only half of these abstracts later appear as full-length articles in peer-reviewed journals, Relman noted in an editorial last July.

"The message for the media," he announced, "is that if they are really interested in the quality of the medical information they promulgate, they would be well advised to play down reports presented at research meetings and concentrate instead on other, more reliable sources of information."

Relman denies that he has extended Ingelfinger's rule, as the JAMA editorials complain, saying that he has just been "more visible in discussing it." He has, however, added a warning against the holding of press conferences by potential authors, because that is where the rule against prior publication is "likely to be violated."

To the suggestion that prior publication of papers submitted to NEJM and the quality of medical reporting elsewhere are two different issues, Relman agrees and says that "I feel much more strongly about the quality of medical reporting theme. The public will call up doctors who have not seen the data in question, and I think that that causes a lot of mischief."

It is Relman's extension of the Ingelfinger rule, as they see it, that has irked JAMA's editorial writers. The recommendation that even the abstracts of papers read at research meetings should be ignored by reporters is viewed by JAMA's Grouse as implying a claim to infallibility for papers accepted by NEJM. It is "dangerous for any medical journal to attempt to assume a mantle of invincibility. Its inevitable failures may lead people to look on medical journals with the same skepticism that they may have for the popular press," Grouse warns.

Relman denies that the good housekeeping seal of eternal truth is automatically awarded to all papers appearing in the NEJM. He says he is not claiming invincibility, only that the peer review given to articles in journals such as NEJM is a better guarantee of quality than a reporter's judgment.

Relman says he discussed his publication policy with Ingelfinger before the latter's death and that "It is fair to say he would have subscribed to it." But there is at least a difference of emphasis in the policies pursued by NEJM's present and previous editors. Ingelfinger had no quarrel with the press; he just wanted to be sure he wasn't scooped. Relman wishes to change the way the press does its job, and his attitude as expressed in his editorial of last July, is condescending.

> NEJM's attempt to change reporting in other journals has affected its rival, JAMA.

The issue perhaps has less in it than meets the eye, in that the press will continue to rely on its own judgment as to what is news and how it is reported, and the public will learn the news sooner or later. Those most affected are medical researchers afraid of falling foul of the Relman code of good conduct, but if they do, they can surely expect a warm welcome in the pages of JAMA, or maybe even in *Science*. —NICHOLAS WADE

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