

Threats to the Integrity of the *Croatian Medical Journal*: an Update

In the editorial from the last issue of the *Croatian Medical Journal (CMJ)*, we described the challenge to the quality of the Journal and integrity of its editors, put forward by one of the Journal owners – Zagreb University School of Medicine, at its Council meeting in November 2007 (1). We invited our critics – the dean of the Zagreb University School of Medicine, Prof. Nada Čikeš, and Prof. Slobodan Vukičević, who was invited to speak about the *CMJ* at the Council meeting, to voice their concerns over the quality of the Journal and the work of its editors-in-chief (1).

Although we received a number of responses from Journal readers and authors, there was no reply from the Dean or Prof. Vukičević, not even an acknowledgment of receipt of our formal invitation to submit a critique of our stewardship of *CMJ*.

The School administration also did not reply to our request for answers about the outcome of *CMJ*'s report to the Dean on the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) expertise on redundant publications of Prof. Asim Kurjak in the *CMJ* (1,2). Neither the Dean of the School nor the Rector of the Zagreb University, Prof. Aleksa Bjeliš, replied to the direct request

of COPE's Chairman, Dr Harvey Marcovitch, about their evaluation of findings for the *CMJ* (3). As Dr Marcovitch explained in the *BMJ*, he received a prompt and detailed account from the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education, and Sports, whereas neither the Dean nor the Rector "has seen fit to reply" to his letters (4).

The Dean, Prof. Čikeš, did not reply to the *CMJ*'s invitation, but many things happened after the meeting of the School's Council on November 27, 2007, and our December editorial (1). A week after the Council meeting in November, one of us (Ana Marušić) received a request from the School's Court of Honor to appear at the Court's ruling on December 12, 2007, to answer the charges put forward by the Dean, Prof. Čikeš, based on anonymous accusations against the two editors of a textbook of anatomy for first year medical students. The Dean, Prof. Čikeš, submitted Prof. Marušić (but not the first editor of the textbook) to a number of investigations by unofficial committees in 2006 and 2007, finally filing an action to the Court of Honor, despite the fact that the textbook editors and the publisher provided relevant documentation that answered the questions put by the unofficial committees. This Court, the same one that acquitted Prof. Asim

Kurjak of all allegations (5), skipped at least ten cases which were already filed and in process months before the Dean's action from October 12, 2007. At the hearing, the Court did not allow either Prof. Marušić or her lawyer access to evidence and an appropriate defense. Prof. Marušić and her legal counsel left the proceedings because of a serious breach of her academic, legal, and constitutional rights. She filed a complaint to the Ministry of Science, Education, and Sports, which is charged with ensuring the legality of the work of higher education institutions in Croatia, and the Ministry issued a formal overruling of the Court of Honor's decisions because of its failure to act in accord with School's own regulations and procedures (document from January 28, 2008, class UP/I-040-01/08-01/00001, No. 533-01-08-0001).

At the same time, both Journal's editors-in-chief have been accused of "unauthorized access to and distribution of" Prof. Vukičević's presentation to the School's Council (document from December 12, 2007, No. 01-4181/07) and are now expecting a hearing before the School's new disciplinary body, Committee for Disciplinary Proceedings. This body accepted the processing of the above claim, despite the fact that Prof. Vukičević's presentation had been a part of the agenda of the School Council's meeting and, as such, an official and public document of the School, according to the School's Bylaw on the Work of the Council. In addition, as announced at the School's Council November meeting (1,2), the Dean and the Dean's Board filed an action against the other Journal's editor in chief (Matko Marušić) – for "damaging the reputation of the School by speaking in the media" (document from November 27, 2007, No. 02-4007/07). Prof. Matko Marušić also waits for a formal hearing before the School's Committee for Disciplinary Proceedings. Marušić's alleged damaging actions include his interview

with a Catholic weekly magazine (6) (English translation available as *web-extra material*) and other media. He is also being disciplined for alleged formal complaint against the School to the Ministry of Science, Education, and Sports and the national anti-corruption legal office because of suspected corruption in the School's procurement of capital scientific equipment.

We have never received any official written communication about the quality or functioning of the Journal from the Zagreb School officials. We also did not receive a reply to our formal request for Prof. Vukičević's presentation to the Council, which is supposed to be an official and, thus, necessarily a public document of the School. Therefore, we are now in an awkward position of having to reply to criticism that, after it was presented to the Zagreb School's Council in November 2007, has not been formally voiced to the Journal or its Management or Editorial Boards. In addition, we are subjected to formal disciplinary procedure related to Prof. Vukičević's official presentation to the Council. Respecting any possible legal implication for the Journal and us as its editors, we will refrain from answering here to the personal accusations and defamatory remarks made by Prof. Vukičević in his presentation to the School's Council, and from giving the exact details from the presentation, except his critique of the Journal's quality.

Prof. Vukičević's objections to the quality of the journal were 3-fold. The first point was that the "true impact of the journal" was very low. However, what he actually presented to the Council as the "true impact" of the journal was the *CMJ*'s 2006 immediacy index from the Thomson Scientific's Journal Citation Reports, corrected for self-citations. Thus the *CMJ*'s official 2006 impact factor of 0.825 was interpreted to really be 0.0568.

The second objection to the journal was that the quality of published articles and their

international visibility were poor, taking as an example the citations to articles published in the *CMJ* which appeared in less prestigious international journals and came from scientifically less developed countries (the names of the countries were shown in bold and their scientists addressed in a derogatory manner).

Finally, the third objection was that successful Croatian researchers did not publish their work in the *CMJ* – presenting as proof five articles that Prof. Vukičević, his collaborators, and other colleagues published in international journals other than the *CMJ*. However, this cannot be the *CMJ*'s fault, simply because these articles were never submitted to the *CMJ*. Also, research into publication practices of academics from the Zagreb School of Medicine shows that the School's publication output is burdened by great differences among individual researchers and relatively unsatisfactory number of papers published in prestigious international journals (7).

Prof. Vukičević's criticism to the quality of the Journal is answered in detail elsewhere in this issue by an analysis of the *CMJ*'s impact factor and other scientometric indicators of the *CMJ*'s quality, visibility, and prestige in relation to its current position in the global community of general medical journals (8), as well as an overview of the Journal's work and educational activities in the last 15 years (9,10).

We also received a number of letters as a response to our invitation to all Journal's stakeholders to voice their suggestions, concerns, and comments about the Journal. As promised, we publish all of these responses in this issue. The other three owners of the journal decided not to make public statements at the moment – they support the work of the journal and refrain from commenting the internal affairs of the Zagreb School of Medicine (11). The Ministry of Science, Education, and Sports publicly supported the work of the

journal and the freedom of speech for its editors (11).

Although the developments described above are very relevant for the Journal and pertinent to the current situation and the future of the medical academic and scientific community in Croatia, we decided against detailed public exposition of the problem, especially when the wish and need for public action and dialogue has so far been completely unidirectional, coming only from our side. The current situation involving us ought to be resolved by the legal and academic systems in Croatia. We are confident that respect for law, procedure, democracy, and human rights will prevail against blind obedience to academic authority (12). As we have recently described in our overview of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to journal editors who try to foster research integrity (13), lack of culture of research integrity in the community is one of the serious external threats to the work of a scientific journal. However, we firmly believe that the Journal's international visibility, along with the internal courage and integrity of the editors and staff (8), are a safeguard for their work and perhaps a critical point for change in the community.

We thank all our readers, authors, and colleagues who contributed their views on the subject in this issue. The Journal will always be open for all criticism, suggestions, and recommendations for the improvement of its quality and editorial work.

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