


Editorial independence needs to be protected and preserved at all cost

**Author:**Soraya Seedat¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Psychiatry,
Faculty of Medicine and
Health Sciences, Stellenbosch
University, Cape Town, South
Africa

Corresponding author:

Soraya Seedat,
sseedat@sun.ac.za

How to cite this article:

Seedat S. Editorial
independence needs to be
protected and preserved at
all cost. J Coll Med S Afr.
2025;3(1), a173. <https://doi.org/10.4102/jcmsa.v3i1.173>

Copyright:

© 2025. The Author.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work
is licensed under the
Creative Commons
Attribution License.

Read online:

Scan this QR
code with your
smart phone or
mobile device
to read online.

‘Editorial independence is a precious privilege... It requires objectivity and a fervent avoidance of bias. When these attributes are violated, a journal’s credibility is damaged, and once diminished, is difficult to regain.’¹

Jerome P. Kassirer, Editor-in-Chief Emeritus of
The New England Journal of Medicine

Editorial independence which refers to the ability of editors and the editorial team at large to make decisions about a journal’s content (e.g., acceptance or rejection of manuscript submissions) based solely on scientific merit, relevance and ethical and societal considerations, and without undue influence, is a scientific and ethical imperative. Put differently, editorial independence is the ‘integrity’ bedrock of the scientific and medical record. It requires a coordinated team effort and commitment by the editor-in-chief, editorial team, editorial board, reviewers and authors to the principles of autonomy; unbiased decision-making; transparency in editorial processes; rigorous peer-review standards; appropriate management of potential conflicts of interest; and ongoing ethical oversight. There can be no compromise. As Professor Kam Bhui, a former editor-in-chief of the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, highlighted in an editorial in the same-mentioned journal published in 2024, it requires an ‘implicit contract of trust in editorial equipoise, judiciousness and authority’.²

Adherence to guidelines that underscore the conditions and requirements for upholding editorial independence, such as those from the Committee on Publication Ethics,³ of which JCMSA’s publisher AOSIS is a member, the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) (<https://www.icmje.org/>), and the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) (<https://www.wame.org/>), are useful in this regard and reinforce best practices.

Over the past few weeks, I have reflected on the threats to editorial independence and how we can strengthen it. JCMSA is co-owned by the Colleges of Medicine of South Africa (CMSA) and its publisher AOSIS. AOSIS manages the online platform, publication process, advertising, and the business end of the journal, while CMSA manages the financial and fundraising aspects. The editor-in-chief and deputy editor remain responsible for all editorial decisions related to content. A Journal Oversight Committee (JOC), with joint representation of CMSA leadership, AOSIS management, and the editor-in-chief, is responsible for setting the overall editorial policy and direction of JCMSA. The JOC is also responsible for ensuring that JCMSA is financially sustainable and has the resources needed to maintain high standards and editorial independence. This includes overseeing the journal’s budget, fundraising and financial performance, and approving major financial decisions related to the journal. Financial sustainability of JCMSA is crucial, considering that it is a diamond open-access journal and dependent on a viable Article Processing Fee waiver fund that can be indefinitely maintained through voluntary donations.

For JCMSA, and any scientific journal for that matter, publication of accurate, replicable and unbiased data that is free of manipulation and that does not pander to particular scientific, economic, political or ideological interests is the only credible way to advance science, improve clinical practice, foster innovation, and engender public trust.² Editorial independence also means ensuring that CMSA and the publisher AOSIS do not interfere with, or inappropriately influence, journal content or exert pressure to publish articles that specific members of CMSA, its leadership or its stakeholders have a vested interest in. For JCMSA, there is a potential conflict of interest in that editorial team members are also members of CMSA who thus need to be especially attuned to impartiality and censorship of content that may be directly or indirectly critical of CMSA but important to communicate to readers in a deferential manner.⁴

With the rise in predatory publishing, paper mills, manuscript retractions, and generative-AI usage to create and enhance inaccurate and fraudulent scientific content, attaining and sustaining editorial independence is a complex challenge and is increasingly under threat. In 2023 alone, the number of retractions of published articles surpassed 10 000, more than double the number in 2022.⁵ In comparison, this is dwarfed by the volume of bogus paper mill products, which are estimated to be in the several hundred thousand. What are the threats to editorial independence? They include flaws in or manipulation of the peer-review process; professional backlash to editorial decisions to publish content on controversial topics to promote academic freedom; and reliance on pharmaceutical and medical-device advertising revenue and associated pressures to publish studies that report favourably on a specific drug or medical device. In this regard, diversified revenue streams can help to reduce dependence on a few dominant sponsors. Editors themselves may have financial or professional ties that compromise their objectivity. Complaints and attacks directed at a journal, its parent-professional society, and/or its publisher about manuscript decisions are potentially damaging and carry reputational risk and must be dealt with fairly, swiftly and respectfully.

Amid the complex and rapidly evolving publication landscape, continuous education of the editorial team on ethical standards is key. While there are several challenges, these can be addressed with genuine and collective commitment. Transparency, objectivity and ethical safeguards throughout the publication life cycle will steer journals to reaffirm their commitment to impartiality. The integrity of scientific and medical records – and the health outcomes they inform – depends on an unwavering resolve to protect and preserve editorial independence.

References

1. Kassirer JP. Editorial independence: Painful lessons. *Lancet*. 2016;387(10026):1358–1359. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(16\)30089-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)30089-7)
2. Bhui K, O'Brien A, Uptegrove R, et al. Protecting and promoting editorial independence. *Br J Psychiatry*. 2024;1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2024.6>
3. COPE Council. COPE guidelines: Guidelines for managing the relationships between society-owned journals, their society, and publishers. Version 1. 2018 [cited 2024 Dec 13]. <https://publicationethics.org/guidance/guideline/managing-relationships-between-society-owned-journals-societies-and-publishers>
4. Malhi GS, Brakoulias V. Impact, integrity and editorial independence. *Aust N Z J Psychiatry*. 2022;56(11):1373–1375. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00048674221132181>
5. Van Noorden R. More than 10,000 research papers were retracted in 2023 – A new record. *Nature*. 2023;624(7992):479–481. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00048674221132181>