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How political should a general medical journal be?

We cannot be apolitical

EDITOR—Delamothe asks to what extent a general medical journal should be political.¹ Every medical article published is the culmination of a long journey that started from a political decision: devoting resources to medical care and research. There is nothing to fear about being political, so long as we are prepared to accept the consequences and deal with the criticism of many who strongly believe that a person or a journal should be apolitical. The *BMJ*'s political stand is the clinical, scientific, social, political, and economic factors affecting health.²

What a reader expects from a journal such as the *BMJ* is that it maintains a balance in terms of the views expressed and scientific articles published. If there is controversy it has to be stated, and if there are conflicting views on the same topic they have to be given equal time and coverage. That is to be politically responsible, and, so far, the *BMJ* has been so.

What the journal cannot afford is to become politicised by allowing only one point of view to be expressed. Also, it cannot afford to politicise the argument and continuously publish long articles dealing with 11 September and its aftermath. The reason: 11 September is a consequence of a series of events transforming our world. To understand it, we have to analyse the unequal relation and misunderstanding between the West and Islam and vice versa; this implies dealing with historical, political, and cultural facts.

Is the *BMJ* or any other medical journal the right place to deal with 11 September and bridge this misunderstanding? I would certainly not pick the *BMJ* as my first source of information on the issue.

How much space should be devoted to politics? As much as it is necessary so long as you keep open to honest political debate and do not become politicised.

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1 Delamothe T. How political should a general medical journal be? *BMJ* 2002;325:1431-2. (21 December.)

2 About the *BMJ*. bmj.com/aboutsite/aboutbmj.shtml (accessed 3 Apr 2003).

Medical journal is no place for politics

EDITOR—The problem with medical journals entering into politics is that it subjects them to the accusation of bias. Delamothe's editorial reveals this in its reference to a "phoney war."¹ That's a cheap shot, and not worthy of an editor of one of the most prestigious medical journals in the world.

You may disagree with your government's stance on Iraq, but that disagreement has no place in a medical journal. Cataloguing the health effects of weapons of mass destruction or debating (honestly and fairly) the merits and demerits of smallpox vaccine are appropriate for the pages of the journal.

It isn't appropriate, however, for you to use your influential position to trumpet your own political biases. Continuing to do so only discredits the journal. How will we know you haven't rejected papers simply because their findings disagree with your politics?

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1 Delamothe T. How political should a general medical journal be? *BMJ* 2002;325:1431-2. (21 December.)

Medical journals may have had role in justifying war

EDITOR—How political should a general medical journal be?¹ After my call earlier this year on the listserver of the World Association of Medical Editors for more debate in medical journals about the reasons for attacking Iraq, I received several messages from medical editors who believe that medical journals should not get involved in political issues. I think that medical journals in fact played an important part in providing the political justification for attacking Iraq.

I believe that most people in the United States and United Kingdom would have preferred not to launch a military attack on the people in Iraq. To persuade them to do so, they need to believe that they are being attacked.² Medical journals have (unwittingly) had an important propaganda role in persuading the public that it is being attacked.

The table shows the growth in the number of articles on bioterrorism published in five major medical journals. To

Numbers of articles on bioterrorism and road traffic crashes published in five major medical journals: *JAMA*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, *BMJ*, *Lancet*, *Annals of Internal Medicine*

Year	Bioterrorism	Traffic crashes
1999	2	18
2000	6	26
2001	44	22
2002	72	56

provide a yardstick against which to assess the comparative public health importance of bioterrorism, the table also includes the number of articles published on road traffic crashes. Articles were retrieved through a Medline search using the MeSH headings bioterrorism, and accidents, traffic. Road traffic crashes kill about 3000 people each day worldwide and disable about 30 000, and the global burden of disease from road traffic crashes is increasing.^{3 4}

Of the 124 articles on bioterrorism, 63% originated in the United States and the rest in the United Kingdom. *JAMA* published the largest proportion of the articles (47%), followed by the *BMJ* (21%), the *Lancet* (16%), and the *New England Journal of Medicine* (15%). The *Annals of Internal Medicine* published only two articles on bioterrorism. Importantly, in 2002 the *BMJ* published a theme issue on road traffic crashes, which accounts for much of the increase in articles on traffic crashes in 2002.⁵

Compared with a health problem that kills 3000 people per day, the public health importance of bioterrorism has been over-emphasised in the leading medical journals. I am not implying that this is a deliberate attempt to alarm the population, but nevertheless it may have had this effect. As a result, medical journals may have unwittingly played an important political part in justifying war in Iraq.

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1 Delamothe T. How political should a general medical journal be? *BMJ* 2002;325:1431-2. (21 December.)

2 Chomsky N, Barsamian D. *Propaganda and the public mind: conversations with Noam Chomsky*. London: Pluto Press, 2001.

3 Murray CJL, Lopez AD. *Global health statistics: a compendium of incidence, prevalence and mortality estimates for over 200 conditions*. Harvard School of Public Health, Boston: Harvard University Press, 1996.

4 Nantulya V, Reich M. The neglected epidemic: road traffic injuries in developing countries. *BMJ* 2002;324:1139-1141

5 Roberts I, Mohan D, Abbasi K. War on the roads. *BMJ* 2002;324:1107-8.