

MB Ackerman

Gatekeepers of scholarship

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The role of an academic is to advance the field. But unless others in the field hear about the advances made, the field will not advance. The means at our disposal to communicate with our peers are limited. Scientific journals are the distributors of novel information; whether experimentally derived or deductive. Commercial media have never had any credibility to perform this job. Perhaps, it is because standards of peer review, and the like, do not exist in commercial journalism.

Scientific journals are founded to introduce and promote the best research available to the academic community. They provide a refereed forum for authors to present their work or the work of others. In this capacity, the scientific journal serves as an unbiased and apolitical filter for scientific facts vs. scientifically presented opinions. When the editorial policy of a journal strays from this mission, however, it can no longer be classified as a scientific journal. It becomes a magazine. Magazines are eager to attract stories, and unwilling to share their stories with others on the market.

The following recounts a 2-month correspondence with the Editor and publishing staff of the *Journal of the American Dental Association*. At the end of it all, they were successful in suppressing the transfer of scientific information to a foreign language publication through subterfuge. It is hoped, by reading this exchange, prospective authors will recognize these actions as pusillanimous behavior. Clearly in this case, the decisions of staff hindered free exchange of scientific information. In turn, unbeknown to its editor, *JADA* has lost its guise as a scientific journal. Not good for the prospective authors and not a good fate for a journal.

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Authors need to be more vigilant and journals more generous, in order to prevent this type of scientific censure from occurring in the future. The following letter represents my last attempt to educate the publishers of *JADA* about the free exchange of scientific information. The letter was withdrawn from the *JADA*, after they made it clear that they had no intention of publishing it.

October 13, 2004

James H. Berry, Associate Publisher
Journal of the American Dental Association
211 E. Chicago Avenue
Chicago, IL, USA

Letter to the Editor: Parochialism in a dental journal

Dear Mr Berry,

I would like to share with the readership of *JADA*, a recent experience I have had. It had to do with a request for permission to translate and re-print an article that I wrote for the Journal in February 2004. I had written it upon the request of Marjorie Jeffcoat, editor of *JADA*. She had requested a 'cover' article aimed at educating the general dentist on the scope of contemporary clinical orthodontic research and practice. The following are excerpts from our correspondences. They ought to be self-explanatory. It is my hope that this episode will stimulate dialogue about the mission of the *Journal of the American Dental Association* and encourage an open discussion about censorship.

E-mail no. 1: August 2004, Nicole Witschel to Marc Ackerman

'We should like to publish a German version of your above-mentioned article in the journal *Informationen aus Orthodontie und Kieferorthopädie* (published by Thieme) and ask for your kind permission to do so'.

E-mail no. 2: August 2004, Marc Ackerman to Nicole Witschel

'I gladly agree to have you reprint my article in German. Please acquire copyright permission from the *Journal of the American Dental Association*'.

E-mail no. 3: August 24, 2004, Nicole Witschel to publicinfo@ada.org

'...in my e-mail to Dr. Ackerman (Please see below my e-mail and his answer) I asked for permission to translate and publish his article in the journal IOK in the German language. I should be grateful, if you gave us permission to do so. The source will of course be properly referenced'.

E-mail no. 4: August 24, 2004, Pat Lewis (Permissions Editor, JADA) to Nicole Witschel with cc: Marc Ackerman

'We regret that we are unable to grant your request to translate Dr. Ackerman's article. The only translations of JADA articles we allow are done by foreign publishers with whom we have a contractual agreement. Unfortunately, we don't have agreements with any German publishers'.

E-mail no. 5 August 24, 2004, Marc Ackerman to Pat Lewis with cc: Marjorie Jeffcoat, Nicole Witschel

'I had no idea that the JADA was so intellectually defensive about sharing material with our German colleagues. Perhaps, the JADA should revisit its mission as a scientific journal, that is to say, the promotion and dissemination of scientific information. I am disgusted by this latest development'.

E-mail no. 6: August 24, 2004, Pat Lewis to Marc Ackerman

'We would be happy to share material if we could be assured that the translation was accurate. I am sure that you as well as we want to make sure your words are being conveyed properly in another language'.

E-mail no. 7: August 24, 2004, Marc Ackerman to Pat Lewis

'Thieme Verlag is one of Germany and Europe's most respected publishers. To think that they would inaccurately translate any piece sounds preposterous'.

E-mail no. 8: August 26, 2004, Nicole Witschel to Pat Lewis with cc: Marc Ackerman

'I was really astonished to hear that you are not willing to grant us permission to reprint an article in the German language that had previously been published in your journal. For more than 30 years it has been out intention to publish original articles in

orthodontics and on the other hand to keep German orthodontists well informed about recent developments in orthodontics in the USA and other countries (in their own language)...We would therefore ask you to think about your decision. We are, of course, also willing to pay a fee for a one-time publication in our September issue. I should be glad to hear from you soon'.

E-mail no. 9: August 31, 2004, Pat Lewis to Nicole Witschel with cc: Marc Ackerman

'We are sorry to disappoint you. We are aware of your fine reputation in the publishing industry. Please let me assure you that our overriding concern is not competition, but that there be some oversight over the translation process to ensure the accuracy of translation...we are unable to grant permission for your request'.

E-mail no. 10: August 31, 2004, Nicole Witschel to Pat Lewis

'I should like to get back to my request for permission to publish Dr. Ackerman's article in the IOK. Since the article was scheduled for our September issue on "Evidence-Based Dentistry" we would like to start printing within the next days. Could you please give me a short answer-possibly until tomorrow- whether you agree to the publication of this article in the German language. As I told you, we are prepared to pay a license fee for that'.

E-mail no. 11: September 9, 2004, Marc Ackerman to Nicole Witschel and Pat Lewis

'I would be willing to incur the cost of having any full Professor at an American University translate and proof the article in question. I will also be willing to sign a waiver that I bear responsibility for the content of the German language article'.

E-mail no. 12: September 13, 2004, Pat Lewis to Nicole Witschel with cc: Marc Ackerman

'We have reconsidered our denial of permission to translate and reprint Dr. Ackerman's article in a German journal. I don't know if it is too late for your current print schedule...I have attached a permissions letter permitting the translation into German and reproduction of the article in print format only, for a copyright usage fee of \$USD200'.

E-Mail no. 13: September 14, 2004, Nicole Witschel to Marc Ackerman

'Thank you very much for your encouraging cooperation. On the one hand it was of course, really nice to finally get permission to publish in the IOK. Unfortunately, Ms. Lewis gave her permission just a few days too late for the current issue "Evidence-Based dentistry". In my e-mail of August 31st, I told her that I needed her approval within the next one or two days. She denied permission. We had to start printing, because the issue was scheduled for the "Meeting of the German Orthodontic Society" on September 22nd in Freiburg'.

The unconventional editorial policy of the *JADA* appears to hinder the dissemination of knowledge and scholarly exchanges.

Sincerely,

Marc B. Ackerman,

Clinical Associate Professor, Department of Orthodontics, Temple University School of Dentistry, Private Practice Orthodontics, Bryn Mawr, PA, USA.

Postscript: Since the writing of this piece, the translated article was published by the IOK in December 2004 – several months after its intended issue. Were it not for the relentless correspondence with the *JADA*, and this Forum piece, the transfer of our scholarship into the German language would not have been possible.

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