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As I See It – The SMA Newsletter

By Dr Goh Lee Gan

The SMA Newsletter has been in existence for 19 years; a total of 108 issues have been brought out to-date, including this issue. It has gone through five changes of its masthead and 10 Newsletter Editors. What has become of it?

The SMA Newsletter grew out of need for a more timely medium of communication of news and events that are of interest to the Profession. The beginning and the aims of the Newsletter were recorded in the Seventh Annual Report of the SMA as follows:

“In June 1966, Council decided to start a newsletter. Mr A Lim was appointed as its first Editor. Mr A Lim, whose idea it was to start the Newsletter, stated that it would be his policy to run it on the lines of Reuters, that is, to report news and events without comment. Personal views would be recorded as such.”

The Newsletter has changed somewhat in function from the Reuters-type reporting to be a “forum for exchange of views” over the years, although admittedly not many members availed themselves of the opportunity.

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Successive generations of Newsletter Editors have struggled to bring out editions which will hopefully meet the tastes of members. Whilst news, views and activities are clearly in order, it must be guarded from evolving into a quasi-medical journal, although practical medicine and therapeutics seem to have a place.

There have been appeals time and again that the Newsletter carry a personal column. Time and again this column has appeared in editions of the Newsletter. It has however been dropped in recent years because of poor response. Perhaps our members are not keen to disclose such events?

Apart from news and views, successive editors have also introduced quips, guffaws, cartoons, leisure and chess articles into its columns. Ah Wun, the wisecrack, was a feature of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Despite its shortcomings of incomplete news coverage, the Newsletter is a chronicle of the times. In it were recorded the issues of the day, etched with varying intensity proportional to how the writers of the day felt about the issues that they were grappling with. The Newsletter is also a record of the participation or non-participation of the membership at large. The number of “Letters to the Editor” is one index of general membership involvement. It is certainly a rare event to receive such a letter these days.

Successive Editors have lamented about the lack of contribution to the Newsletter. Indeed, such a lament appeared in no less than five Annual Reports. One Editor said in the Annual Report of 1975/76:

“The present editorial board fears that if apathy in the Newsletter both in the readership and amongst the advertisers continued, the Newsletter may not, in the near future, have the same standing as it has today.”

Despite the difficulties faced, Newsletter Editors still bring out their issues, although several of them may be way past their issue dates.

WHAT NEWS AND VIEWS SHOULD THE NEWSLETTER REPORT

On the surface, it is simple enough – news and views that are of interest to the membership. In practice however, it may not be so simple, because some news are not easily reportable because they may be sensitive. This is not to say that therefore such items have no place in the Newsletter, but rather they should be reported with great sensitivity and if criticism of any quarter is due, this has to be handed out as constructively as possible and de-venomed of any naked rage.

THE EDITORIAL BOARD’S HEADACHE

Another difficulty concerns what sort of creatures should the Editor and the members be. How close should their views identify with the incumbent Council? There is bound to be more than one view in any issue. Perhaps the best way out is to state the majority view and also comments of dissent if these are felt to be strong enough and cannot be left unsaid.

Fortunately, such polarised views are few and far between. Issues arose most of the time out of failure to communicate, either because there was no time or opportunity or because not enough faith was attached to dialogue as a way of dealing with a difference of opinion.

Editorial freedom rightly should be a closely guarded commodity. This however should not preclude using Council as a sounding board for Editorial drafts. I have found this an enriching experience although it takes a little longer time than if one were to write and polish up the draft alone.

The question may be asked if the Editor has a voice at all. Can he defer in viewpoint without being seen as a thorn in the Council’s side? My answer is yes. Good communication is the essence here. One may be persuaded to take a more moderate stand or one may convince Council of a need of saying what should be said. Good grace and diplomacy surmounts most difficulties.

LESSONS IN THE NEWSLETTER

Perhaps I should examine some sticky issues that Newsletter Editors or the incumbent Council had to face. The one that is nearest to recent recall is the uproar that followed the Straits Times Press lifting a May issue 1980 SMA Editorial and depositing it like a bombshell in the Straits Times one bright September day.

The newspaper report highlighted parts of the SMA Editorial that irked general practitioners because of aspersions cast and which also irked the Director of Medical Services, Ministry of Health, because of incorrect statistics. The then Editorial Board were upset because the response from Council to the Press, the Ministry and the general membership, appeared to have been done in great haste and without any consultation with them. The crux of the argument was whether the Editorial represented the personal views of the Editorial Board or the views and policies of the SMA.

In the debate at the 21st Annual Meeting of 1981, two resolutions were passed, namely:

- “1) *The Editorial of the SMA Newsletter should not contradict the views and policies of the SMA Council, and*
- 2) *That the SMA Council appoint the Editor of the SMA Newsletter who shall be a member of Council and that there should also be another Council Member on the Editorial Board. One of these 2 members should be one of the following: President, Vice-President, Honorary Secretary or Honorary Treasurer. If the Editor is not a member of Council, then he shall be invited as non-voting member at Council meetings.*”

Future editors should take note therefore of these resolutions.

Perhaps this unhappy event would not have come to pass had had the Editorial Board submitted its Editorial draft to Council, if only as a prophylactic measure against words or phrases that though may have been innocently conceived yet may have derogatory or inflammatory interpretations.

The English language is interesting in that one can choose the word with a shade of meaning that fit one's thoughts, provided of course, one is willing to indulge in looking for the most appropriate clothes for those thoughts.

In using Council as a sounding board however, the exercise is not so much as choosing the best clothes but rather to see if the thoughts are attired in jarring clothes – words like “practising on the Cheap”, and others, would be regarded as jarring if not derogatory.

Another issue that was loudly aired in an Annual General Meeting, namely the 16th Annual General Meeting in 1976, concerned the editing of a member's letter to the Editor. The writer viewed the editing as an attempt to “suppress his right to express himself”. The Editor concerned pointed out that “pressure of space made it necessary to publish a shorter version...”

On hindsight, a lesson that Editors could learn from this incident was the importance of communicating with the writer concerned to point out the difficulties, namely, certain passages are couched in too strong words, or it is too long for the space available, and so on. In this way, the writer is made to share in how to dispose of the problematic letter – either to scrap it, re-write it or shorten it. What about grammatical mistakes? Perhaps if they are obvious they can be corrected. One must however be doubly sure. The dictionary is the best help here. Indeed, one may be inclined to publish it, mistakes and all, as I did.

PRESS LEAK

Another difficulty that the Newsletter people had to face is the contents of the Newsletter leaking out into the public or finding its way into some reporter's hands and the reported material given a wrong twist of sensationalism.

There is no law that stops a newspaper if it wishes to, from lifting articles from the Newsletter without permission. The only prophylactic is that writers and Editors must make sure that what they write is true and constructive. Then one would have no fear as to what is being lifted.

It is inevitable that Newsletter people will be besieged by the Press time and again in their forage for articles. There is no doubt that handling press reporters requires experience. However, if one is sincere and helpful, pointing out the difficulties, more often than not, a Press reporter can be a friend and not a monster or fumbler in medical reporting. Indeed, there may views that the press could help us disseminate to the public.

SHOULD THE NEWSLETTER BE CONFINED TO THE PROFESSION ONLY

This issue has been debated before. In the late sixties, the Newsletter was circulated to not only the Medical profession but to the public press.

This practice was however put to a stop as the result of the resolution passed at the 9th Annual General Meeting in 1969. Admittedly, there was more than one school of thought. Some members were apprehensive because the Newsletter contained a lot of personal data of doctors. Others felt that through the medium of the Newsletter, members could rebut false accusations by the lay press.

Whilst it is possible that Newsletter items may be quoted out of context, it can also be argued that it is necessary that politicians, administrators and the lay public be able to share our thoughts, our views and our aspirations.

The Profession perhaps should be seen to have a voice and an ability to voice agreement of policies that are enlightened and to take a stand when false accusations are made. One such platform can be the SMA Newsletter. Of course, this need not be the only platform. Indeed, timely and constructive response in the public press is not only necessary but a crucial complement if only for the purpose for the medical profession to be seen by the public to be assertive, respectable and who would not allow itself to be trampled upon without good reason. ■