Report of the World Association of Medical Editors: Agenda for the Future

World Association of Medical Editors

During a 3-day meeting at Bellagio in January 2001, a group of 20 editors from 12 countries in 5 continents met to map out a strategy for the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME)'s continued development in the service of medical editors over the next several years. The group: 1) Developed a statement of principles on the standards of professionalism and responsibilities of editors (this statement will be posted on the Web site after electronic consultation with and comment by WAME editors); 2) Agreed to assess the extent to which these principles are reflected in practice and to explore barriers to their adoption, using data from a survey and focus groups; 3) Developed and outlined an on-line program for distance learning, targeted at new editors; 4) Planned for formal evaluation of the educational outreach program; and 5) Agreed to support regional initiatives to strengthen local editorial capacity. Underpinning all past and proposed future activities is the WAME Web site. The ambitious plans outlined above will require extensive development of the site, plans for which were made at the Bellagio meeting.

Key words: bibliometrics; education, professional, retraining; journalism, medical; manuscripts, medical; periodicals; practice guidelines; practice patterns, professional; publishing; training support

The information on which health professionals treat their patients is based on what is published in medical journals. There are perhaps 20,000 regularly published medical journals in the world; their quality is highly variable and there are few generally recognized standards. Most medical journal editors work in isolation, usually without training or access to useful support systems and information about how they might improve their practice.

As outlined in WAME's 1995 report (see *http://www.wame.org*), the public invests huge sums of money in health and medical research to address questions about the origins of ill health, and the effects of preventive or therapeutic strategies to protect and improve human health and well-being. Medical journals, of which there are an estimated 20,000 worldwide, are the principal medium for communicating the outcome of this massive public investment.

The influential position of medical journals between public investment in research and public access to the fruits of this investment places a heavy responsibility on those who control what is published – medical journal editors. Medical journal editors have a public duty to ensure that reports of research provide valid information, in language and formats that are accessible to the wide variety of different consumers of this information.

A variety of obstacles confront editors who are committed to trying to improve medical editing. These include lack of formal training for their work; isolation from their peers; lack of ready access to information about how they might improve their practice; lack of the resources that are often required to secure statistical and methodological advice that is so often necessary; and increasing external pressure that could distort their editorial and ethical responsibility to ensure publication of full and honest accounts of research.

Medical journal editors in developing countries and of small journals face additional obstacles. Most editors of such journals edit only part-time and have had little previous experience. Often, high quality manuscripts are difficult to obtain, partly because of competition for such manuscripts from journals with large circulations, partly because medical science and medical writing may be at earlier stages of development. These editors also face scarce financial resources and have limited access to publishing and printing expertise. Those publishing in languages other than English have difficulty getting the articles in their journals indexed in the world's main medical data bases.

Recognizing their crucial role in ensuring that valid information derived from health and medical research is made publicly accessible, there is growing feeling among medical journal editors that something must be done to improve the standards of their work and that of their colleagues. They understand that to achieve higher

standards there is a need to improve the professionalism of medical journal editors. The skills involved in medical journal editing are not obtained during a medical career before entering the publishing field or simply through the process of editing, but are acquired through deliberate attention, study and practice. As with all professions, there is a special body of knowledge that must be expanded and refined through research. Mechanisms are needed for training newcomers to the field. Self-regulating methods must be developed to identify and help editors who perform below reasonable standards and to deal with those who do not improve.

The World Association of Medical Editors

The World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) was formed in 1995 at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Study and Conference Center in Italy, with the aim of improving the standards of medical editing in the world's medical journals, especially those that have difficulty meeting high standards because of limited resources. WAME took advantage of the World Wide Web to address the problems of editors, so that its evolution would be independent of expensive face-to-face association meetings. There are now almost 500 editors in WAME, representing journals in 52 countries. They form an electronic community that shares problems and solutions experienced by medical journal editors around the world. The rapid growth in participation and activity reflects the fact that editors can join WAME at no cost and have full access to WAME's web site (*www.wame. org*) and electronic discussion groups. It also suggests that WAME meets a widely felt need.

Over the past five years, WAME has conducted a global survey of medical editors' needs, assembled a bibliography of relevant books and articles, published a guideline on editorial independence, and established a forum for dealing with ethical problems raised by editors. WAME leaders have facilitated regional editing workshops around the world.

During a second 3-day meeting at Bellagio in January 2001, a group of 20 editors from 12 countries in 5 continents met to map out a strategy for WAME's continued development in the service of medical editors over the next several years. The group: 1) Developed a statement of principles on the standards of professionalism and responsibilities of editors (this statement will be posted on the Web site after electronic consultation with and comment by WAME editors); 2) Agreed to assess the extent to which these principles are reflected in practice and to explore barriers to their adoption, using data from a survey and focus groups; 3) Developed and outlined an on-line program for distance learning, targeted at new editors; 4) Planned for formal evaluation of the educational outreach program; and 5) Agreed to support regional initiatives to strengthen local editorial capacity.

Education and Training Outreach

WAME's main objective is to improve standards of medical editing around the world, and so to improve standards of health care. Editors' needs for education and training have so far been met by:

1. A list serve, set up and maintained by the US National Library of Medicine, which links all members together electronically. Editors use it in particular to pose questions about editorial policies and practices to which interested persons can respond.

2. An Ethics Committee that editors can consult about matters of publication ethics.

3. A "Resources for Editors" section on the Web site, containing a selected bibliography of articles about authorship, peer review, editing, publication ethics, and related topics, and a listing of other organizations and resources for editors.

4. To fulfil its mission, WAME needs to provide as many editors as possible with access to effective educational resources.

On-line Distance Learning Package

WAME plans to develop and evaluate an on-line distance-learning package, targeted primarily at new editors (Table 1). This will involve:

1. An educational syllabus, which will include sections dealing with relationships between editors and owners or publishers of journals, editorial content and publication policies of the journal, evaluation of manuscripts and editorial decision-making, understanding the needs and interests of readers, and dealing with error and allegations of misbehavior.

2. A series of case studies posing, and answering, common questions faced by editors.

3. A questionnaire to help new and potential editors obtain important information about the running of the journal from its owner or publisher.

4. Regular revision and expansion of the existing "Resources for Editors" section of the Web site, with emphasis on articles available on the internet that describe research studies of editing and editorial practices.

5. A mechanism for searching the educational resources.

6. A plan for evaluation of WAME's educational activities.

Regional Workshops

WAME will also support regional initiatives for building local editorial capacity. This support will include:

1. A plan for seeking funds for a series of regional workshops or short courses, to be held wherever local demand and motivation is high – funds to be matched by local funding, in conjunction with other groups such as regional organizations of editors, university or health agencies and foundations.

2. Development of fellowship programs whereby editors could study with other editors.

3. Publication of educational materials developed by WAME.

Ethics and Editorial Policy

In fulfilling its mission to improve standards of medical editing, WAME has assembled online statements on editorial standards by other organizations, books about editing, and a bibliography of opinion arti-

cles describing good editorial practices and research articles assessing the effectiveness of these practices. WAME has also developed its own statement on the relationship between editors and the owners of their journals, and how editorial freedom can be preserved while respecting the business and political roles of medical journals (*http://www.wame.org/statemt.htm*). WAME has also established a system for members to consult experienced editors and ethicists about ethical dilemmas they experience in their work.

The Responsibilities of Editors

WAME believes there is a great need for a widely agreed-upon statement of standards for the responsibilities of medical editors, one that is relevant to all the world's medical journals. Agreement on principles for the responsibilities of medical editors would establish a basis for efforts to improve the level of medical journalism. A draft of this statement (Table 2), which is soon to be reviewed by members, includes four main responsibilities:

1. Respect for editors' constituents (authors, readers, reviewers, and the people who participate in clinical investigation) by making journal processes transparent, thanking reviewers, and protecting the confidentiality of people who participate in research.

2. Promotion of self-correction in science and participation in efforts to improve the practice of scientific investigation by publishing corrections, retractions, and critiques of published articles and by taking responsibility for improving the level of scientific investigation and medical writing in the larger community.

3. Assuring honesty and integrity of the content of the journal, and minimizing bias, by managing conflicts of interest, maintaining confidentiality of information, and separating editorial and business functions of journals.

4. Improving the quality of journals by becoming familiar with the knowledge base for editing, peer review, research ethics, and methods of clinical investigation, and by establishing appropriate programs to monitor journals' performance and receive external feedback.

Exploring Barriers to Improvement

WAME believes that all journals should strive to meet these standards, although the ability to do so depends on the resources and individual circumstances of the journal. WAME plans a worldwide effort to learn more about existing practices for the world's medical journals and barriers to meeting high standards. WAME plans two complementary ways of gathering this information: a survey of editors about the extent to which they currently meet WAME standards and the reasons for failing to do so; and focus groups in a representative sample of regions and journal types to learn in a qualitative fashion about the same phenomena. With this information, WAME will be in a better position to create educational programs that help editors improve their standards.

Ethical Guidance and Support

WAME will ensure that edited versions of the discussions generated by the ethics committee's consultation procedure are made available via the Web site. It will also encourage the setting up of regional committees on

publication ethics where more in-depth and culturally appropriate ethical advice and discussion can take place.

Table 1. What an editor needs to know

1. Relationships between the editor and the owner of the journal (scientific society or association, university, governmental organization, commercial publisher):
   - History of journal and of previous editors
   - Owner's policies and objectives for journal – content, education, demands for space (society papers, etc.), profit
   - Is owner also publisher?
   - Editor's terms and conditions of service – duration of appointment, pay, oversight
   - Reporting arrangements – publications committee, corporate president, etc
   - Commercial issues – circulation, marketing and advertising policies
   - Publication procedures and policies – frequency, available space, delivery (print, electronic), publication details, separation of editorial and advertising content
   - Support for editor and editorial office – staff, equipment, e-mail and internet access, education and training for editors
   - Organization of editorial process – associate editors, editorial board
   - Independence of editor

2. Determination of the editorial content of the journal:
   - Editor's vision for scientific discipline and for journal
   - Types of material to be published:
     – Original research, reviews, editorials, letters, news, etc
     – Society publications – association material, and its identification
     – Breadth of scientific content
     – Needs for change in subject matter
     – Attracting and soliciting manuscripts
     – Theme issues, supplements
   - Roles of associate editors and editorial board

3. Publication policies:
   - Criteria for authorship
   - Policies for submission
   - Information for authors – specifications for content, format, style, illustrations
   - Responsibilities of editors to authors:
     – Maintaining integrity and confidentiality of author's work
     – Prompt review and decision making
     – Constructive evaluation – improvement in manuscript and in research
   - Policies for review – number of reviewers, type of review (masked/unmasked)
   - Manuscript editing and final approval policy

4. Manuscript evaluation and decision-making:
   - Establishment and maintenance of evaluation process:
     – Variations according to type of manuscript
     – Roles of associate editors and editorial board
     – Identifying, training, evaluating and rewarding reviewers
   - Establishment of rational decision-making process
   - Policies and procedures for acceptance, revision and rejection of manuscripts and for dealing with appeals of rejections
   - Role of editor in determining specific content
   - Constructive communication with authors

5. Other editorial responsibilities:
   - Maintaining and publishing records of evaluation process
   - Establishing and maintaining systems for readers' comments/letters to the editor
   - Understanding needs and interests of readers
   - Avoiding financial, personal and other conflicts of interest
   - Dealing with error
   - Dealing with allegations of misbehavior
   - Planning for future of journal

Table 2. Responsibilities of editors: a WAME Statement of Principles[a]

Respect for constituents

Editors should express respect for their constituents (authors, reviewers, readers, and the people who participate in clinical investigation) by:

- Making journal processes transparent by publishing such information as the kinds of articles considered, the number of reviewers per article, how editorial decisions are made, rejection rates, and processing times
- Thanking reviewers by such means as letters of thanks, sharing co-reviewers' comments and editorial decision letters, and publishing lists of reviewers' names
- Ensuring that the review process proceeds as rapidly as possible without sacrificing quality
- Requiring authors to obtain consent to publish from patients who might be identified in an article

Promoting self-correction

Editors should promote self-correction in science and participate in efforts to improve the practice of scientific investigation by:

- Publishing corrections, retractions, and letters critical of articles published in their own journal
- Playing an active role in investigating and preventing fraud
- Taking responsibility for improving the level of scientific investigation and medical writing in the larger community of potential authors
- Giving authors an opportunity to review and approve edited manuscripts before they are published
- Participating in efforts to detect and prevent publication bias – for example, by collaborating with registries of controlled trials and publishing protocols

Minimizing bias

Editors should assure honesty and integrity of the contents of the journals they edit and minimize bias by:

- Defining, implementing and publishing standards for the journal
- Managing conflicts of interest by:
  - assuring that they and reviewers have no financial arrangements with for- profit organizations involved in the research on which they make editorial decisions
  - withdrawing themselves from editorial decisions in which personal relationships or intellectual passion might substantially affect their judgments
  - declaring the existence of potential conflicts of interest in editorial decision-making where they exist
- Publishing descriptions of the peer review practices of their journals, such as whether most original articles published have been reviewed by external consultants or the proportions of the various kinds of articles that are externally reviewed
- Ensuring that manuscripts are treated as confidential documents - by themselves, other editors, and by reviewers
- Maintaining strict separation between the editorial and business activities of the journal
- Developing a formal, written agreement with sponsoring societies or journal owners about governance and responsibilities
- Encouraging authors to describe their individual contributions to the work they have submitted and publishing this information with their articles
- Publishing clear notices if articles have already been published elsewhere
- Avoiding publication bias by judging articles according to the importance of the question and strength of the methods, not whether the results are "positive" or "negative"
- Providing disclosure of authorship, ownership, and funding sources for editorial content of the journal and for the journal as a whole

Improving the quality of the journals

Editors should improve the quality of the journals they edit by:

- Developing policies for recruiting, orienting, training, and evaluating peer reviewers
- Keeping up with the knowledge base for medical editing, peer review, and research and publication ethics
- Continually improving their own understanding of the methods of scientific investigation
- Arranging for submitted manuscripts to be reviewed both by methods and content experts
- Monitoring and periodically reviewing the quality of the journal's editorial practices
- Establishing and using an oversight group to review the journal's practices
- Publishing studies of the quality of the editorial content of the journals if valid studies are submitted

[a]This statement represents the consensus of WAME members on the responsibilities of the medical journal editors who make editorial decisions on manuscripts. WAME believes that all journals should strive to meet the standards for medical editors described in this document, but recognizes that the ability to meet these standards depends on the resources and circumstances of individual journals.

WAME Web Site

Purpose

The purpose of the WAME Web site (*http://www.wame.org*) is to provide resources for teaching and learning about editorial policies, procedures, and ethics for medical journal editors, and to communicate information about WAME for WAME members and others. As a virtual organization, the WAME Web site must provide the technological capability for WAME to realize its goals of education and outreach to medical journal editors worldwide.

Achievements to Date

To date, the WAME Web site has served as a resource for medical journal editors by providing a bibliography of important resources for editors, including books, journal articles, and related organizations, and providing contact information for WAME and its members. The WAME Listserve has provided a forum for editors to pose questions and receive answers from other editors. However, to meet WAME's goal of providing educational outreach through distance learning and exchange among members, a state-of-the-art Web site is needed.

Plans

Such a Web site will:

1. Provide interactive distance learning modules based on WAME's educational syllabus, using case studies for demonstrating how the components are applied in practice, and an evaluation process whereby participants provide feedback to the creators of the modules.

2. Provide worldwide access to WAME's core statements and policies.

3. Provide links to high-quality resources in related fields.

4. Include questions posed by members and the ensuing discussions from the WAME Listserve.

5. Post discussion of ethical issues and how the WAME Ethics Consultation Service resolved them.

6. Enable medical journal editors to exchange ideas via discussion groups, providing the opportunity for debate and discussion of the compelling issues faced by medical journal editors.

7. Provide a powerful search engine, permitting efficient access to pertinent resources available on the site.

8. Facilitate election of officers to the organization.

9. Serve as the virtual meeting site for WAME members worldwide, providing the means for international discussion, debate, and education.

Existing Content of the WAME Web Site

Bibliographic resources. Bibliographic references include Policies of Organizations pertinent to medical journal editors; Books and Monographs; journal articles addressing the areas of authorship, media, peer review and editing, publication, publication ethics, relationships with industry and advertising, and style and format; and other organizations for editors. The members of the Education Committee select these resources, with input from other committees and from members.

How WAME works. How WAME Works provides information about WAME Governance, Committees, and By Laws. The Committees and the Board maintain the section.

Acknowledgments (now Sponsors). Acknowledgments lists the organizations that are provided financial or in-kind support to WAME. This list will be updated and revised to reflect ongoing vs one-time support. The Finance Committee maintains this list.

WAME people. WAME People lists the members of the WAME Board, Directors, and Committees. The members of the Committees maintain this section.

Members. This section lists all current WAME members with contact information. This list is maintained by the Membership Committee, specifically by the Secretary.

Join WAME. Join WAME provides criteria for membership, the membership application form, and the WAME Listserve. This section is maintained by Membership.

Related links. Related links are introduced throughout the Web site as appropriate, to maximize the usefulness of the site for users. The Web Editor maintains these links.

WAME talk. WAME Talk describes the WAME Listserve and provides information about participation and Listserve etiquette. The Secretary maintains this section.

WAME Journal List. The Journal List provides the journals to which WAME members belong, along with links to journals that are online. This list is maintained by the Membership Committee, specifically by the Secretary.

New Content of the WAME Web Site

WAME policy statements. WAME Policy Statements are drafted by the Policy Committee, reviewed by experts in the field to which the statement pertains, and finally reviewed and approved by the Board for posting. Next, members and others post them on the WAME Web site for comment. After a predefined comment period, the Statement is revised taking into account comments received and then approved by the Board as an official WAME Statement. Thus, this section will include 2 types of statements: those already approved by the Board as WAME Policy and those posted for public comment. Each type will be clearly indicated. The Editorial Policy Committee via the Board will maintain this area.

Endorsements of other groups' statements. Organizations that work in areas related to WAME have issued statements pertinent to WAME members (such as the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, the Council of Science Editors, and the Office of Research Integrity). When the WAME Policy Committee believes that such statements have direct implications for issues important to WAME, WAME may consider such statements for official endorsement. Such statements will also be cited, and if possible, posted on the WAME Web site. The Editorial Policy Committee via the Board will maintain this area.

WAME educational syllabus. The WAME Educational Syllabus will be prepared by the Education Committee and, along with the Bibliographic Resources section, forms the core of WAME's online educational efforts. The Syllabus addresses issues related to the editors' responsibilities, ethical behavior, journal management, reporting arrangements, and other issues. The Education Committee via the Board will maintain this area.

Ethics consultation reports. Ethics Consultation Reports will include summaries of cases brought before the Ethics Committee for comment and input. If the editor responsible for bringing the case agrees, the issue raised and the Committee's comments will be posted on the site as an educational tool for editors. The Ethics Committee via the Board will maintain this area.

Listserve summaries. Listserve Summaries will present a question raised by a member via the Listserve believed to be important to other members, followed by pertinent answers provided by other Listserve members. The answers will include the name of the respondent, the journal, and the date of reply. The Secretary and the Web Editor will maintain this area.

Research. The Research section will provide an area for those interested in conducting research to raise possible research topics and identify potential collaborators. The Board will maintain this section.

Committee updates. Committee Updates provides information from Committees without space elsewhere on the site to present important issues that have been raised in the groups. This area will not include Committee minutes but only issues believed to be of interest to members. Each Committee will maintain this area.

Case of the quarter. Case of the Quarter will pose a case created by the Ethics or Education Committees, or raised by a member, that poses a particularly important or difficult issue for editors. This area will provide a discussion group format to enable an interactive discussion to take place. The Web Editor will serve as the moderator. Cases that have generated useful insights for other editors may be considered for permanent posting on the site. The Ethics and Education Committees will maintain this section.

Board communications. Board Communications will serve as a source of communication with members and as an archive of communications from the Board distributed via the Listserve. The Board will maintain this section.

WAME reports. WAME Reports will consistent of brief summaries followed by full documents created at WAME meetings and integral to the founding and development of WAME, for use by members and others who wish to learn about WAME in greater depth. The Board will maintain this area.

WAME news. This section will appear on the WAME Home Page to highlight new features and content on the site for site visitors. This section will include upcoming meetings of interest to WAME members. When a critical mass of new features and content is available, WAME News will be used to create a short message to be sent via the Listserve to WAME members, with brief descriptions of and links to the new content. The Web editor will maintain this section, with updates as often as possible.

Improving WAME's Administration

Established in 1995, WAME is now a fully functional virtual organisation. It has by laws, membership criteria, elected officers, and standing committees responsible for the Web site, educational resources, ethical standards, editorial policy issues, membership, and finance. Members are linked by an electronic list serve, which is in frequent use for exchange of information, ideas, and advice. The list serve facilitated, for example, the rapid and influential worldwide outcry against the removal of the editor of a major international medical journal and helped to resolve a case of suppression of publication of research for political reasons.

Reach out to Editors Around the World

To fulfil its mission, WAME needs to identify and contact editors in need of educational support in areas of the world and areas of health care currently underrepresented among its membership.

Develop Administrative Procedures

To provide an efficient and fully accountable service to its members, WAME needs to further develop its administrative procedures for installing new members, keeping organisational records, coordinating activities of the board and committees, administering funds, accounts, and audit, and coordinating regional activities including educational workshops.

Create a Members Database

To maintain adequate records of members, and to maintain the list serve, WAME needs to create an interactive electronic database of members.

Achieve a Sustainable Financial Base

WAME is committed to providing a free service that reaches out to medical editors in all regions of the world and all areas of health care. To fund this service and to develop it further, WAME needs to achieve a sustainable financial base for its core activities and for implementing its strategic plans.

Contact:
http://www.wame.org