



Jovan Đ. SAVIĆ

The journal ombudsman

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MILITARY MEDICAL ACADEMY, BELGRADE, YUGOSLAVIA

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The first institution of ombudsman was established in Sweden nearly two centuries ago. In Swedish the term "ombudsman" refers to "a person who has an ear to the people" (1). According to the Webster's New World's Dictionary the ombudsman is defined as "an appointed public official who investigates activities of government agencies that may infringe on the rights of individuals". In our country there is suggestion that the word ombudsman should have the meaning of "national advocate".

More recently, this institution (practice, body) has been adopted by several European countries, among them our country, too (2-4). History, development and organization of this practice are described in reference 5. Depending of the country, ombudsmen are appointed at different levels - institutional, regional or national - as well as in different areas including science.

The first journal ombudsman (ombudsperson) was established in *The Lancet* in 1996. The role was modeled on the UK Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration "to record and, where necessary, to investigate episodes of alleged editorial maladministration when a complainant remains dissatisfied with the journal's first response to criticism" (2). Maladministration is defined as avoidable delay, bias or unfairness, failure to give appropriate advice when asked, discourtesy or harassment, failure to follow proper procedures, mistakes in the handling of claims, etc. (6).

The journal ombudsman is impartial, qualified, independent person. He represents one means of improving justice in editorial process. Namely, very often editors are preoccupied by the content of the journal and fulfillment of the wishes of readers for new

knowledge. Besides, there are evidences that editors sometimes abuse the power and trust imposed on to them by authors submitting manuscripts for publication. The presence of ombudsman enables the editorial board and other staff members to pay far more attention to the authors, submission and handling of manuscripts and kind, mutual relationship. The table presents the role of ombudsman, i.e. what he can or cannot investigate, e.g. in *The Lancet* (6).

Table 1. The role of *The Lancet* ombudsperson (6)

What the ombudsperson can investigate
Delays in handling of submitted manuscripts or letters;
Discourtesy;
Failure to follow procedures outlined in "writing for <i>The Lancet</i> ";
Failure to take reasonable account of representations to editors by authors and readers;
Challenges to the publishing ethics of the journals – e.g. accusations of editorial dishonesty, favoritism, victimization, or conflict of interests, matters of taste, and the editorial handling of complaints about author's misconduct
What the ombudsperson cannot investigate
Complaints about the substance (rather than the process) of editorial decisions
Criticism about editorial contents;
Accusations of scientific misconduct;
Any complaint that has not first been submitted to the journal

It is believed that editors of all scientific journals should consider the appointment of an ombudsman. The first article about the position of journal ombudsman and proposal for its establishment in our scientific journals appeared in the *Archive of Oncology* (7).

When an author is dissatisfied with the journal's first response to criticism, complaints are made directly to ombudsman in writing, without informing the editor. Investigation of the ombudsman involves reading of the documents and, when necessary, editor or other members of editorial staff may be interviewed. Final judgment of the ombudsman should be sent in writing both to the editor and complainant.

The ombudsman is obliged to give annual report to the journal. Thus, *The Lancet*, in the second (8) and third (9) ombudsman's annual reports, besides types and results, indicates that the number of complaints were not increased compared to the first annual report (11 complaints, 1996/1997).

Address correspondence to:

Prof. Dr. Jovan Savić, Military Medical Academy, Crnotravska 17, 11000 Belgrade, Yugoslavia

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Journal ombudsman can help editors to devote more time to editorial process by increasing ethical principle and diminishing difficulties that sometimes normally arise in the editor-author relationship during evaluation of the manuscript submitted for publication.

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