

Whither the *Hong Kong Medical Journal*?

This issue of the *Hong Kong Medical Journal* (HKMJ) marks the end of the fifth year of its publication and its transition into the year 2000. After 5 years of publication and in the face of the new millennium, this is perhaps the opportune moment to review where the Journal has gone and what lies ahead. Since January 1995, the Journal has endured many challenges, including a period of uncertainty associated with the change of publisher and senior staff turnover. However, the content and format have remained substantially the same as the first issue. The use of structured abstracts was introduced this year, and book reviews now form a regular section. The circulation figure is currently approximately 6500.

What did the *HKMJ* set out to be? It is a general medical journal for members and fellows of the Hong Kong Academy of Medicine (HKAM) and the Hong Kong Medical Association (HKMA). The Journal has been the continuation of the *Journal of the Hong Kong Medical Association*, which in turn had as its forerunners the *Bulletin of the Hong Kong Medical Association* and the *Bulletin of the Hong Kong Chinese Medical Association*—all covering a total span of more than 50 years.

In 1995, writing in the inaugural issue, the first President of the HKAM, Prof Sir David Todd, had expected the Journal to fulfill the need for post-graduate medical education and training, including continuing medical education (CME). He hoped that "contributions will come not only from local medical doctors and scientists, but also from international contributors."¹ In addition, the President of the HKMA, Dr KH Lee, recounted the history of the predecessors of the *HKMJ* and the good reason for the HKMA and HKAM jointly publishing the Journal.²

Since the publication of the inaugural issue of the *HKMJ*, Hong Kong has metamorphosed from a British territory into the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China. While there has not been any direct impact on the Journal, the change has resulted in increasing bilateral contacts. Our medical community regularly participates in official exchanges and joint meetings with the medical

community of mainland China, and receives many visitors from the mainland. Indeed, we have had some initial interaction with potential contributors to the Journal from the mainland. Another significant event has been the recent economic downturn in Asia, which has reverberated throughout the community. The practice of medicine in Hong Kong has not been spared.

Our medical environment is under challenge. Besides demographic changes, there are demands on cost-effectiveness, evidence-based medicine, consumer advocacy, technological advances, and the imminent registration of Chinese medicine practitioners. The report by the Harvard Team, titled 'Improving Hong Kong's health care system: why and for whom?',³ has alerted the community to other methods of health care financing and delivery, and the Journal has responded, specifically in the form of seminar series^{4,5} and a themed issue.⁶

The medical information environment is also changing rapidly. Earlier this year, shock waves were sent through the medical publishing community following the sudden departure of the chief editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine* and the sacking of the chief editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, with the latter putting his talents into internet medical publishing.

In 1995, searching for medical information on the *Medline* literature database was somewhat cumbersome—the Internet had just come into use. Today, *Medline* on the Internet is free and there are a growing number of businesses and organisations that provide information services, including producing and dispatching copies of full-text articles for private and research use—all at the click of the computer mouse. Through these organisations, one can obtain journal articles by e-mail, facsimile transmission, or by mail. One such organisation comprises the 21 International *Medlars* Centres—one of which is in Hong Kong—which exist in partnership with the National Library of Medicine in the United States. There are now vast amounts of very current medical information available on the Internet and in various electronic forms.

More and more medical journals are joining the 'electronic explosion'. And the Director of the National Institutes of Health in the United States, Dr Harold Varmus, has started an initiative to publish biomedical journals electronically. Do we really still need medical journals in print form?

At home, we see a maturing of the constituent Colleges of the HKAM, and some have ventured into the arena of journal publishing in their own specialties. Altogether, we have a good crop of medical journals for such a small community. They cover cardiology, dermatology, emergency medicine, family medicine, geriatrics, gerontology, infectious disease, nephrology, ophthalmology, orthopaedic surgery, paediatrics, psychiatry, radiology, and surgery. Each provides a useful source of information to a special group of readers. We have seen excellent original research and articles providing insights into the medical matters of Hong Kong, with much of the emphasis on local experience.

A recent visitor from overseas showed me a copy of the 'how to' type of medical journal. In it, articles are written in a clear format and include only salient points; useful guidelines and insights in various conditions and methods are presented. Such a publication is very useful for the busy practitioner. If the *HKMJ* were to adopt this format, would we be ignoring the inquiring mind and the stimulation of finding new answers?

What is the future for the *HKMJ*? The cost of publishing in print is high. Do we have the luxury of maintaining the status quo? Should the Journal stay as it is, with minor adjustments and some enhancements, or should it change to purely a source of CME? Should it go extensively electronic? This is certainly the future trend. Winston Churchill had admonished, "It is a mistake to look too far ahead. Only one link in the chain of destiny can be handled at a time."⁷ Is our next 'link' to publish the Journal electronically and to revamp the system of article submission, peer review, and blinding?

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