Cartwright Inquiry correspondence in the NZMJ: enough is enough

Frank A Frizelle

In 2010, the NZMJ published several papers commenting on the The Report of the Cervical Cancer Inquiry 1988 by the then District Court Judge Silvia Cartwright. The Inquiry, as many will know, was into the management of cervical dysplasia at National Woman’s Hospital. The published papers have focused on various interpretations of data related to the Inquiry, the personalities involved, the significance of the Inquiry, and more recent commentaries on the Inquiry including a book by Professor Bryder. In addition, the role of the Inquiry in developing the current medicolegal structure in New Zealand—especially the role of the Health and Disability Commissioner (HDC)—was explored by Ron Paterson in his editorial.

The many papers (editorials and letters) that we published—22 years later—explored a wide range of issues relevant to the 1988 Report and I have tried to give authors and responders a free hand (within the limits that an editor must set). I feel now, however, that few constructive comments are coming from the continued barrage of email correspondence sent to me.

As I have pointed out already to some who have contacted me, you do not have to convince me of whatever point of view you have, I am an editor not a referee. Any further letters published in the NZMJ on this topic must provide new insights into the issue, not just re-stating what an author previously said (or did not say). Indeed, these letters generally seem to have become tedious and repetitive and do not provide any new insight. Like children fighting it now appears that some authors believe that the person who provides the last comment is considered ‘right’.

This sort of behaviour is not uncommon, and at various times on certain topics I have rejected letters when they no longer contribute to the discussion. Indeed, many journals have time limits, such as the NEJM which will accept letters for only 3 weeks following publication of an article. I have used a more open approach and have generally accepted correspondence up to 3 months later if it contributes to the discussion. We are well past that point now. On this topic I now feel that ‘enough is enough’ and I will only publish another letter if it provides new information.

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References: