

Editorial

Censorship or common sense? Not all opinions merit publication

The question of what to publish when it comes to opinion articles, guest editorials, or letters is problematical. It could be justifiably argued that journals should publish *all* viewpoints, especially, perhaps, those that are contrary to popular belief. An editor who is not willing to publish opposing viewpoints risks censoring maverick opinions. Once censorship has been unintentionally committed one time, it will become easier to repeat. It could quickly become full-fledged censorship as the editor decides what people should, and should not, be able to read.

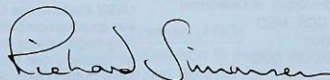
So, there are certainly good reasons to avoid any tendency toward limiting the opinions that an editor accepts for publication. But there are some exceptions. Even in a society dedicated to freedom of speech, we do not have the right to stand up in a crowded theater and cry out "Fire!" Recently a letter published in the *Journal of the American Dental Association (JADA)* cried "Fire!" over the issue of pit and fissure sealant.

Under the guise of criticizing a previously published opinion article, the letter writer in *JADA* chose to vent his inaccurate and damaging rhetoric about pit and fissure sealant. The letter was typical of arguments from those narrow-minded skeptics who believe in anecdote over science, or unpublished opinions over scientific study. In this letter, the writer claimed that "Manufacturers themselves have advocated their product [pit and fissure sealant], illustrating the placement of sealants on a quadrant of teeth—in a pool of saliva. . . ." I would like to see one example of this patently ridiculous claim. For manufacturers to advocate use of their product in a manner guaranteed to lead to failure is pure folly. For such a false claim to have been given credibility by publication in a reputable journal is unfortunate.

The writer, however, was not finished after his first enigmatic charge. He went on to claim that "sealants won't ever 'make it' as a prime preventive measure. . . ." It may come as a shock to the writer that his prediction has already been proven false as the application of pit and fissure sealant is indeed, and has been for some years, a prime preventive measure against pit and fissure caries.

The question is where to draw the line at publishing opinions. Certainly letters containing factual inaccuracies warrant concern. Such letters only serve to bolster the arguments of those who are swayed by unproven criticisms of modern dental treatments. In the case of the sealant letter, publication gave a measure of credibility to those who would deny this preventive technique to the children who could benefit from the treatment. Thus, I believe, editors and their staffs should screen out patently false or inflammatory letters, guest editorials, and other nonrefereed submissions prior to potential publication, even if this brings the charge of censorship to bear.

While we can only hope that exclusion criteria for opinion-related articles be minimal, not all free expressions deserve credibility by publication in professional journals. In particular, uninformed and inaccurate letters such as the above-mentioned, publication of which does far more harm than good, should not get past the discerning eye of an editorial staff.



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