

The Morecambe Bay Medical Journal

Alison Harry, editorial assistant 1989-2004

Way back in 1989, I was a recently-appointed member of staff in the then Postgraduate Medical Centre (whose name became the Education Centre fairly soon, to emphasise its availability to non-medical staff). The clinical tutor at the time was Dr Jim Morris, now retired from the pathology department, and he suggested to me that I become the editorial assistant on the local medical journal which he was planning to create and edit. I hadn't done work of that kind before but was sure I'd find it interesting and as a born pedant the idea of working on articles, improving their grammar and presentation, was definitely appealing, and I thought I'd enjoy the other element of the role, working with the printers and typesetter to design the page layouts and overall appearance of the journal, so I was happy to become involved in this new venture.

The idea behind starting the journal was for it to be a vehicle of information and teaching for local medical personnel. Dr Morris saw it as an extension of the local post-graduate education programme designed to keep everybody up to date with medical developments. It would inform hospital staff and General Practitioners (GPs) in the catchment area of current and impending hospital and community practice, newly-appointed consultants' area of expertise, future plans, management matters and research. It would be sent to every member of the medical staff, every ward, all board members, heads of departments, all local GPs and General Dental Practitioners (GDPs), libraries in all hospitals in the northwest, all contributing authors and any other interested party.

At the time, quite a number of hospitals round the country produced in-house journals of various kinds for their staff and colleagues, so Dr Morris and I got hold of as many copies of current ones as we could and visited some of the nearer hospitals which published them in order to talk to their editors and find out how they went about it at every stage, what the problems may be and where the money was found to finance them.

It seemed that the people who were involved were usually enthusiasts who were keen enough to do most of the work in their own time for no remuneration, and some of them had managed to publish their journals for a good number of years. The most common warning we were given was the difficulty in continuing to get enough copy to put together the planned number of issues year after year, and we were aware that some journals were appearing less frequently as time went by, and others had ceased publication altogether.

The journals we saw varied widely in appearance, from printed A4 sheets stapled together to those printed on good quality paper with 'proper' covers and a very polished, professional look to them. Of course we wanted our journal to be one of the latter kind, which meant sourcing enough long-term funding to pay the higher costs this would incur.

The then chief executive, Paul Whitfield, agreed to support us with some funding, and we also approached pharmaceutical companies and local businesses asking if they would sponsor the journal. We got a good response from most of the organisations we contacted and the *quid pro quo* for their support was that an advert for each of

them was printed on the inside back cover of each issue for as long as they sponsored the journal and copies of each issue were sent to them. This worked for a number of years but gradually the entire costs of the journal were undertaken by the hospital, which has remained the case ever since.

Dr Morris felt it was important that our journal should not only look good but also have a high standard of content, something much more than a newsletter, with a wider remit. He felt it should be something that staff would keep and for this it needed to be physically robust and its articles useful and interesting. So we needed to find a printer who could produce a journal of the kind we envisaged, and enough staff from the hospital and beyond willing and able to supply the articles we would need. Neither presented any problem.

After visiting several local printers, including our own printing department based at the Lancaster Moor Hospital, we decided that Dixon Printers in Kendal would be the best, and we definitely made the right choice – David Rigg and his staff at Dixons gave us all the help we needed, right down to choosing which style of font to use, and have never failed to do everything that we expected, and more. David advised us to use Drummond Typesetters (I don't think we even realised that we'd need a typesetter, so little did we know about the world of journals), which was another perfect choice, and until he left the world of typesetting, Shaun Drummond was always the most helpful and genial colleague you could hope for, just as keen as I was that every page of every issue should be perfect, and as put out as I was if for any reason it couldn't be.

It was the same with our authors: for some time our copy came largely from the medical staff, usually consultants, from senior managers and from staff at Lancaster University, and there was rarely if ever any problem in getting in enough work to fill an issue on time. We even sometimes managed to have an article or two in hand, ready to use in future issues if their content didn't need to be used immediately.

We were advised by a colleague to register the journal with an ISSN number (similar to the ISBN numbers allocated to books), which we did. A requirement of this is that a copy of each issue is sent to the British Library, which is one of the six legal deposit libraries in the UK, and who will hold a complete set of every issue of the journal as a permanent record. The idea behind this is that there is a copy of every published work, so that if ever someone wants to look up one of our issues they can access it via the British Library. There is also a full set of the journal in the trust's library at the RLI site.

All of this happened so long ago that almost every aspect of producing a journal has completely changed. When the journal began in the summer of 1989 (ready for the first issue in January 1990 – 'new decade, new journal'), the Postgraduate Medical Centre was a fairly unusual department in that it had a computer, which sat in splendid isolation in a room off the library – the 'computer room'. Not many people used, much less owned, a computer then, and I was sent off on a course to learn how

to master it, although for some time it wasn't much help as so few authors had access to a computer that their work came to me hand-written, typed or on tape, and even after I had keyed it in to the computer, I had to print it out and post it to Shaun for typesetting as email was still a thing of the future. He would then typeset it and send me the first proof in hard copy by post, which I would sub-edit, return to him for alterations, wait for the corrected copy to come back to me, then send it to the author for their comments and any amendments. Then I would wait for its return and work again on it before sending it on to Shaun for, we hoped, a final proof, which I would send to the author, largely for their information rather than for any further changes at this stage.

When we got to the point where we had enough work to make up an issue, I would go to sit with Shaun as we worked through every page, dropping in images as needed, adjusting the page layout and trying to get every article to look as good as it could in every way whilst leaving as little white space as possible, and, preferably, starting every article on a right-hand page – this can be harder than it may seem. It was sometimes slow work to put an issue together and we could spend a surprisingly long time playing around with font and image sizes trying to fit everything in as we wanted. Shaun never gave up and was always determined that each issue should be as nearly perfect as possible. He used what seemed to me fantastically sophisticated software and was adept at using it to achieve the very best outcome. I can't imagine what the journal would have looked like without his expertise, and as far as I know its internal appearance is still exactly as he did it.

The external appearance is now completely different. The journal began life as the Lancaster and Westmorland Medical Journal, as in those days the hospitals in Lancaster and in Kendal were managed as one entity and the thinking was that it would be nice to include the word 'Westmorland' to commemorate the old Westmorland County Hospital, which was soon to be replaced by the new Westmorland General Hospital. The cover was fire-engine red, and the same colour was used on the journal's notepaper. The second editor, Mike Flanagan, changed this to Cambridge blue at much the same time as the journal became the Morecambe Bay Medical Journal, which happened when Furness General Hospital became part of the Lancaster/Kendal trust. A later editor, Andrew Severn, introduced the use of local scenes on the covers, using three images complementing the three issues each year.

Not only the appearance but also the ethos of the journal changed over the years, with different editors shifting its focus and ownership. Mike Flanagan, now retired from the radiology department, became the second editor in 1994 and widened the range of authors to include nursing and other non-medical healthcare staff. He also commissioned book reviews from medical colleagues, and approached 'big name' published authors asking if they would contribute to the journal, which many did – Mike to supply names here. Peter Dyer in the maxillofacial department took over as editor in 2002 and pioneered the idea of 'themed' issues which often comprised articles from one department or speciality, whilst continuing to encourage articles from a range of non-medical staff.

Another change has been that the role of editor is now recognised by the allocation of one session a week, so there is protected time for the incumbent to dedicate to their work on the journal. Financial reward?

It was whilst Peter Dyer was editor that I left my post with the journal and Alan Hale was appointed to the role, and shortly after this Andrew Severn became editor, remaining in the role until the recent appointment of its new editor, Shadaba Ahmed.

