The editorial on conferences, in the last issue,1 came in for much criticism from a section of the members during the 36th Annual conference of the Indian Pharmacological Society (IPS) at New Delhi. The Executive Committee (EC) of the IPS which met a day before the conference, took strong exception to the contents and the language (!) of the editorial. This was resolutely defended by me as the chief editor at that meeting. Subsequently, in the General Body meeting, the same issue was raised by a member and the EC members at the helm of affairs decided that the chief editor should not be allowed to publish editorials on any other general issue excepting science and tried to put this decision to vote. The request by the author of the editorial (B. Gitanjali) to address the audience was initially denied but later granted and the spontaneous, resounding applause after her two-minute speech defending her views was ample evidence that most members agreed with the contents of the editorial. After a few learned members spoke in support of the issues expressed in the editorial, the discussion was closed.

I do not find fault with the EC or anyone who chose to criticize the editorial, for I believe it is their right to be critical, as it is my duty to appropriately respond to their criticism. The editors of the IJP have never ever believed that they are beyond criticism. Time and again we have been criticized by many and in some instances we have defended our stand (when we felt we were right) and at other times we have admitted our lapses and corrected ourselves. A letter criticizing our editorial lapses was submitted to us sometime back and we did not hesitate to publish it2 (the author of that letter was later inducted into the editorial team and now he goes through all the accepted manuscripts and painstakingly corrects them). IJP has also instituted redressal mechanisms3 and has never wavered to correct itself (see the report of Ombudsman on page 7).

But in this instance, the EC did not just stop with being critical; it tried to curtail editorial freedom. What was wrong with the editorial? I asked this question to many of our critics but received no convincing answer. “Who is Gitanjali to write such an editorial?”, “What are her credentials?” “She must be careful about the words she uses”, “It hurts”, “The language should be toned down” “The journal is read by everyone and such issues should not be published”, “You (the chief editor) should not publish editorials on general issues but only on scientific topics”, “Why write on negative issues?”, were the replies I received for my question. In my opinion these replies/accusations/suggestions were, to put it mildly, either vague or weak and therefore unacceptable.

Editors are supposed to write editorials, aren’t they? That was exactly what Gitanjali, the Section Editor (Clinical Pharmacology) of the IJP did. Is not a section editor qualified to write an editorial? What extra credentials does an editor need to pen an editorial? Advice and accusations regarding the language and words of the editorial, frankly, took us by surprise. For we felt there was nothing in it to hurt anyone in particular. I believe the use of the word “debt” was misunderstood. The context in which the word was used was not meant to insult anyone. It is important that one should consider the context rather than the literal meaning of individual words. However, IJP is sorry if anyone felt hurt by the editorial. The sole purpose of the editorial was to improve the standard of the conferences and was never to upset anyone. I wonder whether a similar outburst took place in response to the editorials by PC. Dandiya and R.K. Raina who were far more critical of IPS members and used much stronger language in what they tried to get across to the senior as well as junior pharmacologists of India.4,5

Is there any logic in the argument that such issues should not be published in the journal because we are washing our dirty linen in public? The editorial was an attempt at improving the conduct of conferences and was not intended to bring down the reputation of the IPS. In my opinion, the IJP, which is proactive regarding issues concerning IPS members should not hesitate to discuss such matters. Unless there is transparency, openness and a boldness to address problems related to the society we cannot hope to improve. I am convinced that the editorials of the IJP will serve to elevate our professional standing in the eyes of the international scientific community because we will be viewed as a society which introspects and is not afraid to criticize ourselves. What better confirmation of our sincerity can we present?

The final ruling that was tried to be imposed on us that ‘the journal should not publish editorials on general issues’ was much more serious as it attempted to curtail editorial freedom. This move was rightly thwarted as the majority supported the views expressed in the editorial and affirmed that such issues should be discussed in a forum like the journal. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICME) in its monograph entitled ‘Uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals’ states “editors must have full authority for determining the editorial content of the journal. This concept of editorial freedom should be resolutely defended by editors even to the extent of their placing their positions at stake”.6 I strongly subscribe to this statement.

But how much editorial freedom should the Chief Editor have? Providing a clear-cut answer to this question is a difficult proposition. The IPS owns the IJP and there is no denying that the owner is free to draw policies to govern the journal in a manner it deems fit. However, in the absence of any policy, it is the chief editor’s prerogative to decide what should be and should not be published. One must remember, the chief editor

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of the IJP is also a member of the IPS and he/she is directly elected by the members, unlike the editors of some journals who are hired by the societies to run their journals. I agree with the suggestion by M.K. Unnikrishnan (see page XX in this issue) that a framework within which editorial freedom should be respected must be constructed. Until then common sense will be the guiding principle in deciding the contents.

The entire episode over the editorial proved one thing beyond doubt. The budding and young pharmacologists want ‘less fun and more science’ in the conferences. That, I think is GREAT.

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References