

## Banning order by local journal

**S**ir,—Your journal and others occasionally draw attention to the kinds of misconduct perpetrated by the various parties involved in the publication of research—whether as authors, referees or editors.<sup>1</sup> I outline below an example of unprofessional behaviour that a colleague and I experienced some years ago that continues to undermine our reputation.

On 9 April 1996, I received a registered letter from the incumbent editor of the *South African Medical Journal* (SAMJ), informing me that it was his decision, in consultation with the relevant editorial committee, that '...the SAMJ will no longer consider articles, editorials or other manuscripts from... [my late colleague, F.J. Lichtigfeld, and myself] ...for publication in this journal.' The reason advanced for the ban was our '...repetitive contestation of editorial decisions regarding the publication of submissions...'

The ban was withdrawn, on the evidence of a letter from the editor, only after one of us (F.J.L.) had complained to what was then called the Medical Association of South Africa. At no time has the editor of the SAMJ tendered any apology for his conduct, and, despite repeated requests from me to meet with representatives of the journal to discuss the banning, no opportunity was permitted to resolve the dispute.

It is a commonly accepted right for any contributing scientific author to be able to use valid and rational argument in the defence of his/her submitted manuscript, and it should also be the responsibility of any editorial board to react with an equally-responsible impartial, science-based rejoinder. It is my contention that no journal editor has

the right to proclaim an arbitrary 'ban' (black-listing) on any contributor; certainly not on the grounds that have been quoted above. An editorial board of a reputable scientific periodical is expected to examine all serious submissions, and pass impartial and peer-reviewed judgment on their content alone.

While the banning order was still in force, it was brought to the attention of the Royal Society of South Africa over the period 1996 to 1999 under three successive presidencies. None of the presidents, nor any of their respective councils, were willing to make any pronouncement on the 'banning'. This was in spite of the intercession of the (former) committee of the Northern Branch of the Royal Society of South Africa, to attempt to obtain a ruling in principle, on the matter.

Subsequently, the South African Human Rights Commission, in January 2001, indicated that this lack of response on the part of the SAMJ's editor was prima facie evidence of a violation of our rights as enshrined in the South African Constitution. The treatment to which we have been submitted continues to damage our professional relations with colleagues

I draw the attention of your readership to this matter in the belief that it is in the interest of science and scientists, at large, to ensure that those placed in positions of responsibility, whether as referees or editors or officials of professional associations, should not abuse their powers in this kind of way.

**M.A. Gillman**

South African Brain Research Institute,  
6 Campbell Street, Waverley 2090, South Africa.  
E-mail: mag@sabri.org.za

1. Anon. (2003). The good, the bad, and the ugly. *S. Afr. J. Sci.* 99, 502–503.