Maintaining journal independence

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The membership of the American Association of Neurological Surgeons (AANS) should be aware of a disagreement between myself and the AANS Executive Committee.

In my view, the matter is straightforward and should not be controversial.

The Editorial Board is the ruling body of the Journal of Neurosurgery and each Editor since 1944 has served at their pleasure. I had anticipated that the Editorial Board could feasibly elect a new Editor at the April meeting of the AANS. To this end, a search committee carefully identified four candidates (a pediatric neurosurgeon, spine surgeon, and two general neurosurgeons) and these candidates subsequently visited the Journal offices in Charlottesville. Each candidate has proposed detailed but quite different plans for the future direction and administration of the Journals. They and their proposals will be presented to the 32 member Editorial Board of the Journals at the annual afternoon Journals’ meeting at the AANS. At this two and one half hour meeting, the Editorial Board will listen to the presentations, ask questions, and discuss who should be elected the next Editor.

I felt that this was insufficient time for the Board members to carefully consider each candidate’s interview and to evaluate these very different proposals for the future of the Journals. I also thought that forcing a vote at the April meeting would likely result in factions, not consensus. Although the candidates and their proposals should be presented at the Editorial Board Meeting, I suggested that putting off the final vote until June 8 at the Senior Society meeting would give our Advisory Board and our Editorial Board time to thoughtfully assess the interviews, to review the proposals, and to reach a well-reasoned and measured consensus regarding the future of the Journals. It is not possible to do this in one afternoon.

After I made this recommendation, I received from the Executive Committee a reply which flatly rejected my effort to afford the Editorial Board a few weeks to reach consensus on the new Editor in Chief (EIC). Instead, the Executive Committee asserted that if the Editorial Board fails to elect a new EIC and submit that individual’s name to the AANS by May 1, the Executive Committee will, on May 2, unilaterally terminate the current EIC, assume the role of EIC, assume control of all operations of the JNS offices in Charlottesville, and dictate the process of selecting the next EIC. Specifically, the Executive Committee asserts that it will send a letter to all members of the Editorial Board on May 2 for a vote, and declare the candidate with the largest number of votes to immediately assume the role of EIC, apparently regardless of whether that candidate receives less than majority approval and regardless of the response rate from this mailing.

The scholarly and executive independence of the Journal has often been challenged in the past but always without success. This attempt by the AANS to take on the role held by the Journals’ Board members, those most familiar with the Journals and the neurosurgical literature, represents a sea change for JNS publishing. This assertion of control endangers the future well-being of the journals, compromises the independence of the Editorial Board, improperly assumes that the Executive Committee has authority to terminate, without cause, the duly elected EIC and fundamentally denies the Editorial Board the opportunity to reach consensus on the future leadership of the Journals of Neurosurgery.

If the AANS Executive Committee forces a vote at the meeting or takes over the Journals of Neurosurgery Board’s responsibilities—neither action being justified—every subsequent Editor will be beholden to the AANS Executive Committee, the critical importance of independence will be lost. The Journal will become the political voice of the AANS not the scholarly voice of the world neurosurgical community.

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