

## Book

### The best editors get fired

Jerry Kassirer was fired as Editor-in-Chief of *The New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)* in 1999. Two decades later, he has written, in the guise of a memoir, a blistering attack on his former employer, the Massachusetts Medical Society. Revenge, it is often said, is a dish best served cold. Kassirer relives old battles and settles outstanding scores. He savages the present state of medicine and medical journals. And he offers a bleak view of the future for a profession he clearly loves. *Unanticipated Outcomes: A Medical Memoir* is a painful autoautopsy of a successful life brought down by the greed of small minds and the tripwire of personal foible.

The *NEJM* holds iconic status in American medicine. According to Kassirer, it is “the greatest clinical journal in the world”, a journal “that makes or breaks careers”, and is “one of the nation’s best institutions”. The *NEJM* is nothing less than the “gold standard of American medicine”. Becoming Editor-in-Chief of the *NEJM* was “the best job in medicine” and “the pinnacle” of Kassirer’s career. But when he was appointed Editor in 1991, “the journal was in need of much improvement”, he writes. It was “worn and dreary” and “badly needed a makeover”. He set about rejuvenating the journal with energy and creativity. In his view, “I believe the Journal benefitted from my tenure.” He quotes one colleague judging him “the best editor ever”.

Kassirer’s signature issue was the colonisation of medicine by business—commercialisation and conflicts of interest, “profit fever”, and “the pursuit of self-interest”. “Nearly all of academic medicine was on the take”, he writes. “Academics had begun to tighten their ties to industry” and “in many instances the quest for money had overtaken physicians’ roles as healers”. The result was the slow erosion of professional values.

This creeping avarice also invaded the traditionally independent non-profit world. Here lay the roots of Kassirer’s fall: the “commercial exploits” of the Massachusetts Medical Society. Kassirer argues that the owners of the *NEJM* saw the journal as a “cash cow”, rich from advertising revenue, a deep well of dollars to fund the Society’s growing publishing and political aspirations. Its leaders wanted to exploit the journal’s brand by creating an *NEJM* Publishing Group. They wanted to put the *NEJM*’s name on a plethora of spin-off publications “to become a vast publishing empire”. Kassirer saw this new mission as “a dangerous step”, one that “risks diluting what the Journal stands for”, “compromising its role as the standard-bearer for clinical research”, and “downplaying its larger social role”.

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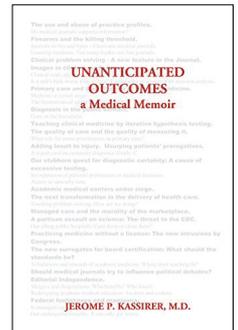
The Society sought to be “the world’s premier publisher” of medical information. But Kassirer suggests they were not up to the job—“few understood publishing issues, editing, or the nuances of modern science or health policy”. The Society was a trades union, influenced by the prevailing 1990s culture of “entrepreneurialism, innovation, expansion, and corporatisation”. Kassirer would have none of it: “I would not agree to changes that I believed undermined the Journal’s sacred standards”; “I was opposed to brand extension”; “I strenuously argued against spin-offs.”

During his final 2 years of “sturm und drang”, Kassirer “never thought that the

Massachusetts Medical Society would fire me”. He believed the journal “had become an institution that transcended its ownership by the Society”. He confesses to being “a persistent thorn in the side of Society leaders”. He railed against the policies of the Society and the American Medical Association. But he gradually became “alienated”, marginalised, and excluded. He lost authority over the journal’s name. “By 1999”, he writes, “I had lost the battle over commercial expansionism and branding.” With tragic frankness, he concludes, “I had lost political support.” By June, 1999, the Society’s officers had had enough. They refused to renew his contract. His personal “American dream” had come to an end in “my most notable professional defeat”.

The best editors get fired. An editor who lingers in their job for decades has likely made bitter compromises. Kassirer never compromised. He readily admits that he was “uncooperative and intransigent”. He was an exceptional Editor-in-Chief of the *NEJM*. Today, in America’s strange and perplexing political times, the country needs publications like the *NEJM* more than ever—institutions that resist the tide of hate and division, promote the values of honesty and integrity, and protect ideas of altruism and compassion. Under the leadership of its current Editor-in Chief, Jeff Drazen, the *NEJM* remains one of those institutions. Kassirer’s memoir justly and urgently reminds us of what happens when money corrupts medicine. But it also points to the dangers of hubris, excessive self-confidence, and the tendency of those in power to personal exaltation. In the final reckoning of life, none of us are indispensable. Not even, surprising as it may seem, the Editor-in-Chief of the *NEJM*.

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