

Scholarship is an important component of any profession. Scholarly material needs to be reviewed and disseminated in order to reach and impact the members of the profession. Within a profession, there are usually several different journals, each contributing a unique perspective. Some journals have been publishing forever. Some are new, and some will be retired. What impact, if any, does it have on a profession when a journal is retired?

Optometric Educators Respond

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Healthcare providers are under constant and persistent pressure to generate flawless, critical, sometimes life-saving algorithms with speed and efficiency, while performing complex tasks. Initially, education is delivered through intense clinical and didactic training. Repetition and evaluation with emphasis on accountability indoctrinate students, of all levels, to the rigorousness of the occupation. Complex concepts and apparatus come together in the domain of the fragility of life and death, producing anxiety and culture shock, amidst the insecurity of self-doubt. Health care is a demanding profession, and its methods of education are unique. Adding to the idiosyncrasies, learners are almost always adult, teachers are infrequently trained as educators, and curricula are repetitively scrutinized and perpetually in flux, all while advancing

technology fuels the evolution of new instruments. Without a thirst for, and commitment toward, the principles and philosophies of lifelong learning (the perpetual re-evaluation of knowledge, equipment, procedures and protocols), even seasoned personnel will inevitably find they are committing errors of commission or omission, which may, in the worst of circumstances, irreparably affect outcomes.¹⁻⁴

The lifelong learning concept is appropriate for all who recognize that they have (or must create) opportunities to develop and expand their competencies once they begin their operational role.^{2,5,6} The constant scrutiny inherent in healthcare delivery, in general, creates feelings of vulnerability in the provider. While many of our previously learned concepts endure, maintaining knowledge that is “up to date” is a necessity. Technological advances, new clinical practices and interventions, new drug interactions and increased patient demands all make balanced and continuous progress an unconditional requirement.¹⁻⁶

Mistake anticipation is one of the hallmark features of veteran workers. Within the framework of risk prediction, healthcare workers, of all lev-

els, must evaluate presenting clinical signs and symptoms to extrapolate outcomes and formulate contingencies. They do so to avoid initiating interventions that may place patients in danger. Without additional training, this subtle but necessary sense rests singly upon a provider’s experiences. Lifelong learning increases the database for corrective anticipation (foreseeing the possibility of complications and initiating a correction to avoid an unwanted cascade before it occurs).^{3,5,6}

Practitioners and healthcare professionals at large will unquestionably face a future of increasingly challenging care requirements. There is a need for collaboration between colleagues, personnel, hospitals, physicians and institutions to develop strategies embracing the philosophy of continuing education, so that ultimately, optimal care is delivered to the residents of their community.¹⁻⁴ The ethical and responsible way of reviewing old and new competencies, for organizations and individuals, begins when its leadership promotes nothing less than a hunger for knowing. We must motivate ourselves, and through our own actions, motivate our colleagues, to enforce

lifelong-learning accountability. We must each renew our dedication to the standards of excellence placed before us by our professors and predecessors. We must recognize our responsibilities to the patients and public we serve.

When any journal (electronic or printed) that participates in this mission is retired after years of providing a light that guided followers down the road of understanding, a void is created as a counted-upon friend is lost. While the basic laws of nature and physics dictate that everything must have a beginning, a middle, and an end, there is always a period of sadness and meditation at the moment when even something as inanimate as a journal ceases in its functioning. The immediate effect is the silencing of the voices that contributed to its valor. The ripple effect follows when colleagues wishing to share their ideas no longer have that venue. The lasting effect is the loss of the process by which that particular periodical, as guided by its editor and editorial board, approached the mission of education for its readership.

Our world is in a constant state of evolution and flux, but even in the moment of contemplation when one journal has run its last issue there can be optimism. Inevitably, another journal will rise to take its place. The receding publication should be remembered and celebrated for the good that it offered and the growth it sustained. So long as there is continued effort toward the commitment of lifelong learning, there will be progress. It's more than just ethics. It's a matter of spirit.

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To answer the question as to the impact the loss of a journal has upon a profession, one first has to consider the purpose of the journal to the profession. The answer may not be so obvious in today's information age, where a massive amount of material can be obtained on a myriad of topics by a proficient searcher using a few clicks and keystrokes. This raises an additional question: What does a professional journal — in this case, that of a healthcare profession like optometry — provide that other types of resources do not?

One way to approach the issue is by first identifying those constituencies that the journal serves. As I see it, they include four groups, all interconnected: the individuals who contribute to the journal, those who read the journal, the profession associated with the journal, and the public at large. To take each individually:

- For those contributing to the journal, the publication provides a vehicle to disseminate their work to a select readership with a vested interest and/or knowledge of the subject matter. In this sense it serves not only as a means of expression, but also as a stimulus and impetus for their scholarship.
- For the reader, a professional jour-

nal can keep him or her up-to-date with current scholarly developments within the profession. It serves as a source of knowledge, which in the case of a refereed journal, has passed through an editing process by professionals familiar with the subject and qualified to speak for its quality. For healthcare professionals, this is used to enhance themselves as patient care providers.

- For the profession as an organizational unit, a journal may serve several purposes. It allows it to coalesce around a theme or a particular aspect within the profession. It unites those within the profession. It provides a forum for communication to members within the profession to comment, dialogue and interact with one another. It represents a statement to those outside of the profession, and in doing so helps to define the character of the profession. It allows the profession to define, refine and advance its scope, as well as to develop its direction.
- Finally, for the public at large, a healthcare journal can provide a body of knowledge that can be applied to treat conditions in an effort to improve patients' lives. Particularly at a time when the magnitude of medical information is so great — and the quality so variable — it is crucial that publications containing scientifically sound material exist to inform clinical practice.

Most healthcare professions have more than one journal devoted to serving the scope of the profession. Thus, not one journal can cover all aspects of a profession as broad as optometry. Multiple journals are needed to address various aspects of the profession. In a dynamic profession and market, an individual journal may expand or contract in content, and the number of journals within a profession may increase or decrease over time.

When a journal is retired, it has the potential to leave needs unfulfilled for the writers, readership, profession or society at large that are served by it. All have a potential to be diminished

by its absence. Some of the journal's functions may be taken up by the expansion of another journal within the profession. Thus, another journal may expand its content to include areas that had previously been covered by the retired journal. This can be a positive development. If another journal with significant readership is able to function as a focal point, it may in fact serve the profession well, by capturing more "market share" in the establishment of a more unified and robust meeting place for its membership. The presence of such a journal will depend on other journals in the profession. Are there others with the interest, inclination and resources to fill this gap?

On the other hand, if a journal serves a particular niche within the profession not served by other journals, it can be difficult for another journal to fill the void. Members of the profession may turn to journals of other professions to obtain material or make submissions to journals unavailable in their own profession. This may work toward the detriment of the profession. For a journal that represents a public face of its profession, that profession may be diminished without having the journal to represent itself. The profession itself may lose esteem in the eyes of other professions and the public. Its sense of identity may become compromised. The profession's contribution to society as a whole may be lessened if its uniqueness in content becomes diluted in blending with that of the journals of other professions. New material may be less likely to emerge without the banner of a profession serving as a stimulus for submission.

It represents a challenge for the profession — its leadership, editorship, and membership at large — to assess the consequences of the loss of one of its journals, and to determine whether its needs can be met by existing ones. If not, steps must be taken to establish new publications to compensate for the loss, in order to assure that long-established professional gains are not lost. The profession needs to look into the future with wisdom and foresight regarding the impact of these changes and take action accordingly.

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When a journal ceases to publish, my first feeling is that there is a sense of loss, as the journal was familiar and comfortable. Then I wonder whether the retirement of the journal is another sign of a "dumbing down" or lack of seriousness in the profession?

Academics worry whether they will have an outlet for publishing. What journal(s) will reach the audience the retired journal used to reach? What other journal(s) are on the side of organized optometry or speak for optometry?

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A professional journal is the keystone to any profession, illuminating for others the ideas, attitudes, specialized knowledge, research and technical expertise embodied within. In our profession, a journal represents these same goals wrapped under the envelope of vision and clinical science.

But, before embarking on the necessity of a professional journal, one must reflect on what are the attributes of a profession. This question is not without a history in our own ranks. In the early parts of the 20th century, optometry also wrestled with these same questions in the face of adversity from not only medical professionals but also trade entities that did not see the need to advance and be recognized as a profession. The attributes of a learned profession were best described several decades ago and continue to have relevance in the literature for those seeking this status. In short, professions were marked by the autonomous control of the education of their members, and they produced a body of knowledge, ideas and skills aimed at serving people, all of which earned status within the society at large. Enveloping this was an understanding that the professional would

maintain a standard of competence and ethics as a member.

Progressing onward, optometry needed and benefitted from visionaries who molded and shaped what would become a full-fledged, recognized profession. Uniquely, they could see the best for the profession despite the currents and climate that might exist at the moment. One of these visionaries, Dr. Charles Sheard, remarked in a 1939 address to the profession, as published in *Optometry: Journal of the American Optometric Association*, "However, it is a matter of no consequence to those who are not fundamentally concerned with 'ologies' and 'isms'; for, if optometry cannot measure up to the standard it will be superseded by systems which will be developed (and, in part, are being developed) in and by the field of medicine."¹ It is always the measured "standard" to which a profession must achieve in order for it to continue its status amongst other professionals.

The distinguishing features of a profession are the production of standard knowledge that is inherent in the research and scholarly activity accomplished by those constituents that belong. The dissemination of this knowledge is essential to highlight new ideas, transmit important research findings, review important concepts, develop new clinical techniques and discuss clinical cases, to name just a few. In all, these activities strive toward the ultimate goal of moving the profession forward by advancing a set of knowledge that becomes part of the intellectual property for the profession. This form of intellectual dissemination can exist in a variety of formats that generally include peer- and non-peer-reviewed journal venues. In this way, a clinical profession has within its means various forms of publications providing a multitude of benefits to ultimately enhance patient care.

Fundamentally, a profession's journal serves at least four functions. First, it serves to validate material, both scientific and clinical, that can benefit its own members. In the case of a clinical profession, this validation will also serve its individual patients. Second, it serves to highlight particular sets of information or ideas that are important to the

profession or may be of current significance for patient care. Thirdly, it provides a platform for academic optometrists and vision scientists to publish. Most are required, as part of their promotion advancement, to publish their work. These same academics are also an important facet for the education of future optometric colleagues, thus it is important to their academic lives as well as the continuity of an institution's teaching to provide a means for advancing in rank via publishing. Lastly, it is a sounding board for the profession itself and to others, as a means to clearly demonstrate the scholarly depth and breadth of the profession.

The role of a journal is not only important to the profession, but all university settings, and many private optometry programs require, as part of the promotion process, whether tenure exists or not, the ability to publish in peer-reviewed publications. This is a time-honored tradition that allows colleagues (peers) to assess the information presented. Although not foolproof, it does assure a vetting process that promotes the veracity of the information prior to publication. Currently, only one peer-reviewed publication exists for optometry within the United States, which limits venues for publication by scholars of all types and limits information to those who would benefit from this scientific rigor.

Information provided by professional journals also influences information conveyed through lectures and seminars. When fellow professionals attend continuing education courses, one finds a growing cadre of presenters that use evidence-based medicine to support their information. Most, if not all, this evidence-based information is from referenced journal articles that serve to reinforce basic clinical principles. Landmark studies, first appearing in print, are used from the podium to enlighten, educate and help practicing optometrists stay current with the literature.

Therefore, to ensure a profession's vibrancy, especially one that is growing and expanding like optometry, a journal plays a vital role. The greater the access and dissemination of information, whether in the realm of vision science

or clinical science, the greater the opportunity for individual practitioners to benefit from a lifelong learning avenue of education. The 21st century offers multiple ways in which information is circulated. For instance, we have the standard and more traditional paper journal route as well as an expanding group of more contemporary forms such as electronic journals, newsletters and e-blasts. All are important forms of delivering information; however, peer-reviewed avenues are still considered to be the gold standard, whether in print or electronic format. Without these forms of publication, I daresay the profession sacrifices the opportunity to influence its fellow colleagues but also loses legitimacy among other professionals. It is also of fundamental importance that a profession has a journal that bears its name on the front cover banner. All major professions — medicine, dentistry, nursing, chiropractic — have journals that bear their name and are important conduits of information to their respective professions.

The struggles optometry has faced have been longstanding and have been battled on a number of fronts, all of which are important. Legislative and scholarly are just a few ways in which the profession serves to protect itself and progressively move forward. Without one of these, the profession slowly recedes back into its former self, moving into a tradesman occupation.

In this very journal in 1991, Dr. Alden Haffner stated, "Optometrists, as well as scientific authors, have published more texts, and appear as primary or as co-authors in research papers and in books and journals. Many of these newer journals and textbooks are under the aegis of major national publishers, an indication of the increased standing of the profession."² It is the "standing" that we risk when a journal is discontinued. The hope is that visionaries within the profession will emerge to understand and implement a more holistic approach to preserving the professional standing of optometry.

Finally, it is important to visit part of the mission statement of the American Optometric Association, which reads, "Optometrists and other professionals will look to the American Optometric

Association for professional standards, research and education leadership which serve to enhance and ensure competent, quality patient care."³ Journals provide a means to fulfill this mission statement and enhance the knowledge base of its individual members as well as showcase the ideas, research and clinical expertise to other professionals and the public at large. It can be argued that the imparting of knowledge may be able to be attained by another journal elsewhere; however, the rapid increase in knowledge is severely limited or impaired when the available avenues to publish are diminished. An expanding discipline is often marked by an expanding collection of journal opportunities. One only has to look at an area close to our own profession, refractive surgery. Expansion of a profession requires expansion of information and knowledge. The profession is weakened, in small part, with the passing of any professional journal.

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