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Statement from Dr Rhona MacDonald, former senior editor, *The Lancet*

After two months of disciplinary procedures in which I was not allowed to talk to anyone, I have been dismissed from my position as senior editor of *The Lancet* for putting my ethical obligations before the policies of Elsevier, *The Lancet's* publisher.

Although Elsevier acknowledge that I acted with integrity, that they understand the reasons for my actions, and that my actions were “moral,” I have been dismissed for “gross misconduct.”

This situation arose after the editor of *The Lancet* unilaterally re-wrote an editorial that I had written on behalf of *The Lancet* that changed the whole meaning of the editorial without giving me, as author, or the rest of the leader writing team, the opportunity to make any comments or suggestions before the editorial went to press. Apart from breaching *The Lancet's* policy on leader writing (where all of the editor changes must be in liaison with the author of each editorial), the re-written editorial went against the agreed leader pitch and in my view, was damaging to the poorest people of the world. After the re-written editorial went to press, and after making my objections known internally and disassociating myself from the published editorial, I contacted the contributors to the editorial (people I had interviewed on the agreed pitch to help shape the editorial) to apologise and to let them know what had happened as was my professional, ethical, and journalistic obligations towards them. I also sent the published version of the editorial and my original version saying that I did not want this information to be forwarded to anyone else, particularly the media.

Unfortunately, one of the contributors sent my email to The Guardian and the Guardian contacted the editor of *The Lancet*. However, thanks largely to my intervention, the Guardian did not publish a story. Elsevier insist that my actions put the company at risk and, even though they understand the reasons for my actions, have imposed their harshest punishment on me—immediate dismissal. I appealed this decision as disproportionate and unfair but my appeal was unsuccessful.

Furthermore, while making it clear that I was dismissed, Elsevier offered me a compromise agreement where I agreed to stay silent over what had happened, and the company would not officially say that I had been dismissed. Elsevier also offered me just over £10 000 and refused to increase this amount when I made it clear to them that any amount they gave would go to charitable causes. I also suggested that the company could give directly to these causes instead of via me, thus enhancing Elsevier's reputation through social corporate responsibility benefits. Elsevier was willing to do this but only for the original amount which is not enough to cover the charity causes that I contributed to when I had a regular income.

I believe that telling the truth is always the best policy and so I have not entered into any agreement with Elsevier. And just because something is contended to be legal, does not necessarily make it right, as seen in Elsevier's (through the parent company, Reed Elsevier) association with the hosting of arms fairs (a situation that no longer exists thanks to an international campaign against Elsevier which I was heavily involved in even though I was an Elsevier employee.) Likewise, dismissing an employee, who Elsevier itself admits acted with integrity, is not right.

I have loved working for *The Lancet* and have been devoted to it for the 3 years and 9 months that I worked there. I respect my *Lancet* colleagues and am saddened that my time at *The Lancet* has had to end in this way.

Dr Rhona MacDonald

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