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Medical Group Seeks Probe of Its Journal

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By DAVID ARMSTRONG

Updated March 28, 2009 12:01 a.m. ET

The American Medical Association said it has asked an oversight committee to investigate charges that the top editors of its well-known medical journal threatened a researcher who publicly faulted a study in the publication.

The move by the AMA follows criticism of the actions of top editors at the Journal of the American Medical Association, known as JAMA.

The AMA, in a statement, said JAMA operates with editorial independence. However, the association said it has "formally referred" the matter to a seven-member Journal Oversight Committee, comprised primarily of medical academics, to investigate the actions of JAMA editors. The oversight committee is a standing body that has editorial responsibility for JAMA, including evaluating the performance of the editor in chief.

A Tennessee researcher, Jonathan Leo, says top JAMA editors threatened him and his dean after he published an online letter earlier this month in the British journal BMJ that criticized how results were reported in a JAMA study last year that looked at the use of the antidepressant Lexapro in stroke victims. Dr. Leo also said JAMA didn't disclose the author of the study's financial relationship with Lexapro's maker, Forest Laboratories Inc.

Dr. Leo is a professor of neuroanatomy at Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate, Tenn. Forest acknowledged that it had paid the author for speeches, but said his Lexapro research was independent.

Dr. Leo said JAMA editors demanded that he retract the letter. In addition, he says JAMA's executive deputy editor, Phil Fontanarosa, told him, "You are banned from JAMA for life. You will be sorry." Dr. Fontanarosa, through a spokeswoman, has said Dr. Leo's version of the conversation is "inaccurate."

Dr. Leo's dean, Ray Stowers, says JAMA Editor in Chief Catherine DeAngelis threatened in a telephone conversation earlier this month that she would "ruin the reputation of our medical school" if he didn't force Dr. Leo to retract the BMJ letter and stop talking to the media. Dr. DeAngelis, through a spokeswoman, has denied threatening the dean.

The AMA statement said it takes the concerns raised over the Dr. Leo matter "very seriously." It said the AMA board will "give careful consideration to whatever is reported to it" by the oversight committee.

The AMA action comes a day after a nonprofit group that monitors industry links to medical research called for the suspension of the JAMA editors, and an investigation into their treatment of Dr. Leo.

In an editorial posted on the JAMA Web site last week, Drs. DeAngelis and Fontanarosa responded to the controversy over their handling of Dr. Leo's criticisms by accusing the researcher of a "serious breach of confidentiality" by writing about the problems with the JAMA study while the medical journal was still investigating the matter.

Dr. Leo said he identified the undisclosed conflict of interest through a quick Internet search. The editors said that, going forward, anyone complaining of an author failing to report a conflict of interest will "be specifically informed that he/she should not reveal this information to third parties or the media while an investigation is under way."

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