120 years young

The human biological clock is set at about 120 years, though most succumb long before and it is quite exceptional for anyone to get to strike this time. Having been established in 1884, the SAMJ now celebrates reaching this milestone. The energetic and outspoken editor of the first South African Medical Journal, Dr W Darley-Hartley from East London, understood how important it was for the profession to have a recognised organ of its own. He aimed 'to record the result of scientific and clinical observation on the one hand, and on the other to fearlessly, as far as in us lies, guide, direct and defend the common interests of the profession and the ethical properties of its individual members'. How does today’s SAMJ compare with the past, what major issues does it face and what lies in store?

At the journal’s centenary celebration in 1984, the editor, Stuart Gilder, was struck by the similarity between problems exercising the medical profession in those days and at the time of his review. They are still with us! High on our agenda are the ongoing arguments about the fee tariff, the relationships between doctors and pharmacists and our right to dispense, and problems with the general public and the media. While smallpox which at times swept the country, has been conquered and polio is also about to disappear off the planet, we are still plagued with sexually transmitted diseases, tuberculosis and resistant forms of malaria and now have the ghastly new addition of an infectious disaster, HIV/AIDS.

Since our centenary the journal has undergone many evolutionary changes, some with unanimous support and others despite vigorous resistance. The changing health care environment, political and mediopolitical revolution and money, so often the final arbiter, have all played their roles.

Increasing competition with an increasing number of specialist journals, the successful launch of CME which celebrates its 21st birthday this year, and many new commercial offerings required continual adaptation of the SAMJ to meet new needs and challenges.

**Editorial independence** is a concept which editors and it is to be hoped most readers value highly. However, even in what are regarded as the most open societies this can be a fragile value easily shattered by external forces. The most shameful example in the history of the SAMJ was the withholding, at the behest of the then Chairman and the Secretary-General of the Medical Association, of correspondence critical of the Executive Committee of the Association, all contributions now carry the name of the contributor(s). The addition of skilled investigative reporters to the editorial team has resulted in vastly improved coverage of the medico-political landscape. The recent march by doctors on parliament, led by the chairman of SAMA, Kgosi Letlape, and covered by Chris Bateman in this issue, is likely to be judged as one of the most remarkable demonstrations of unity across political lines in the history of medicine in this country.

The use of **language** in the SAMJ has been one of the most emotive issues in its history. Even the innocuous proposed change in 1987 of the Afrikaans 'Tydskrif' to 'Joernaal', with full support of the Afrikaans-speaking medical schools, had Marais Viljoen, Secretary-General of MASA, rallying the troops in strong opposition. An editorial in 1984 noted the worldwide increasing dominance of English as the most important scientific language. South Africa has marched increasingly in tune with the world on this issue, not because of SAMJ policy, but because of the choice of its contributors and its readers.

At 120 years young the SAMJ now competes in the age of space and electronics. Its next challenge is to make our online presence more readily accessible to members and to the world at large, thus building on the fine foundations laid by our predecessors.

J P de V van Niekerk
Deputy Editor