

# Tough-Talking Journal Editor Faces Accusations of Leniency

By DONALD G. McNEIL Jr.

If Tony Soprano were seeing a pediatrician instead of a psychiatrist, it would be Dr. Catherine D. DeAngelis. And he would have been scared straight long ago.

Dr. DeAngelis, editor in chief of The Journal of the American Medical Association, has the Italian grandmother thing down, thanks to growing up in a Pennsylvania mining town with a millworker father and a waitress mother. One of her e-mail addresses is jama.mama.

She also pretends she has an Uncle Guido to break legs for her. On her office door are postcards of statues of guys named Guido.

But Dr. DeAngelis, who is at the center of a controversy over conflicts of interest for journal authors, does more than play at being tough. In 2001, she was briefly taken hostage by Chechens in Turkey and, after collapsing from dehydration, woke up in restraints in an Istanbul hospital. And 18 months ago, at age 64, she walked out of a Chicago hospital on canes four days after a bus jumped a curb and broke her pelvis.

"Uncle Guido took care of the bus," she said. "It's still in the garage."

She is the first woman to edit the journal, commonly known as JAMA, in its 123-year history. Her résumé runs 25 pages, excluding minor details like these: On dull days she blasts the "William Tell Overture" across the cubicles, and the bird in her office ficus tree has a motion detector that makes visitors jump.

Her joke about her health (and her red blood cells): "I wanted to be on the cutting edge; instead, I'm on the bleeding edge, in the water with the sharks. Thank God my hematocrit is high."

Sharks are circling Dr. DeAngelis because she advocates forcing authors of journal articles to disclose every penny they take that may create a conflict of in-



Peter Wynn Thompson for The New York Times

**PLAYING TOUGH** Catherine D. DeAngelis copes with writers' conflicts of interest.

terest. But now the authors of several JAMA articles have failed to make the disclosures, and Dr. DeAngelis has been accused of carelessness.

"It sounds like they're being sloppy," Dr. Jerome P. Kassirer, a former editor of the rival New England Journal of Medicine, told The Associated Press, referring to the editors at JAMA.

In one case, the authors of a study on the use of antidepressants during pregnancy, published in JAMA in February, neglected to disclose fees and research money from drug makers. The study found that pregnant women who stopped taking anti-

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depressants risked renewed depression.

In another case at JAMA, the authors of a study saying that women with migraines were more likely to get heart disease did not mention they had received money from companies that make painkillers. The authors of a study linking some arthritis drugs to cancer omitted mention of speaking fees. And in a 2005 case that infuriated anti-abortion campaigners, two authors of a study concluding that fetuses probably cannot feel pain before the seventh month of pregnancy did not disclose that one had been an abortion-rights lawyer and the other ran an abortion clinic.

In her defense, Dr. DeAngelis said she had dug up conflicts she suspected, that she had questioned the authors, and that when she believed an author intended to deceive her, she asked that the author be disciplined by the dean of his or her medical school.

She also publishes corrections in which she names doctors who evade her rules. She said one such doctor from Harvard, whom she declined to name, called her in tears.

"This follows them the rest of their life," Dr. DeAngelis said.

Further, she has tightened the journal's guidelines, making authors sign statements that describe any possible conflicts.

"It's very rare that it's deliberate," she said. "In most cases, they just don't get it. But the rule is: You reveal, then let me or the other editors decide whether it's relevant."

Dr. Joseph B. Martin, dean of the Harvard

Medical School, said he completely concurred with Dr. DeAngelis's argument that doctors should disclose "more rather than less, and ideally everything."

Dr. DeAngelis says she gets 6,000 submissions a year with an average of six authors each, and she cannot check them all. "I'm not the F.B.I.," she said.

Asked if she could give the rules even more teeth, perhaps even arrange with editors of other top journals to blacklist cheaters, she said, "Have you ever heard of the Sherman Antitrust Act? I've talked to three lawyers about that. They all said: 'You want to end up in jail? Don't go there.'"

Dr. Gregory D. Curfman, executive editor of The New England Journal of Medicine, agreed that checking up on every author was impossible, and expressed admiration for Dr. DeAngelis, with whom he has worked on a council of editors of medical journals in the United States and Europe. His journal uses slightly different disclosure procedures, "but I don't think there are any major differences," he said.

Dr. DeAngelis has long pushed for better care for children and wrote a pediatrics textbook for nurses. At Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, she was a champion for women, demanding equal salaries, promotions and the right to give prestigious lectures.

"She also mentored us," said Dr. Janice E. Clements, who took her place as vice dean of the faculty at Johns Hopkins. "She gave us guidelines about how to be influential, and that helped some of us become leaders."

Since taking the JAMA editorship in 2000,

## A debate over conflicts of interest involving doctors and drug companies.

Dr. DeAngelis has made a name for herself by attacking the influence of drug companies. When companies were caught concealing the result of clinical trials in which their products failed, she pushed the editors' council to demand that all trials be registered in a public database so that unfavorable data would be equally available.

"The companies went bonkers," she said.

That attitude — she said she was "trained by the Sisters of No Mercy" — has led her into a public feud with some researchers.

Dr. Thomas P. Stossel, a Harvard hematologist who invented a blood-storage technique and defends the profit motive in medicine, argues that "academic socialists and the conflict-of-interest vigilantes" are stifling the biotechnology revolution by exaggerating the fear that doctors who own patents or company stock will fabricate data.

"This idea that money is evil and academia is made up of saints is nonsense," Dr. Stossel said. "Some of my vaunted academic colleagues would run their grandmothers over." He favors disclosure, too, he said, but journal editors "have acquired halos and become arbiters of scientific morality."

"There's this myth that if Mother Teresa, the Dalai Lama and Catherine DeAngelis

got up and told us what to do, the public's health would be better off," he said. "That's not true."

Dr. DeAngelis, who has publicly feuded with Dr. Stossel in the letters column of The Washington Post, argues that she does not hate the drug companies, whom she has called "for-profit people who do God's work."

"If it weren't for them," she said, "we'd still be taking my grandmother's brioschl," a cure-all she was regularly given as a child.

But she says pharmaceutical companies do try to corrupt researchers by asking them to put their names on ghost-written articles and by using journals like hers to implicitly endorse their products.

Dr. DeAngelis will not let companies buy advertisements in issues in which their products are studied, and when she attends a medical dinner and discovers a drug company has paid for it, she said: "I don't eat. It kills me, but I only drink water. Tap water."

That is one of her relatively mainstream views. By contrast, she wants it to be a crime for doctors to accept any gift from drug company representatives. "A lot of doctors are stupid in that they don't realize that by taking a pizza or going to a ballgame or letting a drug rep bring doughnuts to the office, they're being bought," she said.

That stubbornness began early. At age 4, in Old Forge, Pa., she slit and resewed her dolls, playing surgeon, and snubbed the nurse's kit her parents gave her.

Nonetheless, her family's poverty, her high school guidance counselor — the football coach — and the novel "Bernie Be-

comes A Nun" persuaded her to go to nursing school as she considered joining the Africa missions of the Maryknoll Sisters. Instead, in an irreligious conversion, she ended up working at Columbia-Presbyterian in Manhattan, and then did pre-med work at Wilkes College, where she was the homecoming queen and the first woman to be class president. She received her master's degree from the University of Pittsburgh.

She called the health care system that has left 40 million Americans uninsured "disgusting," and she supports the abolition of medical insurance and for-profit hospitals. Recalling the 1930's eugenicists who advocated sterilizing the poor, she said, "We don't castrate people anymore, but by not providing them access to health care, we still mistreat the weak."

In her field, many of these ideas are unpopular. Her predecessor as editor, Dr. George Lundberg, was fired by the American Medical Association after he published a poll that found most college students did not consider oral sex to be sex. (The board for the medical association saw the article as an unsubtle effort to influence efforts to impeach President Clinton.)

Dr. DeAngelis declined to take the job as editor until an independent oversight committee was created and a two-thirds vote was required to dismiss her. Now, she said, she feels comfortable, saying that being editor requires someone "tough-minded, thick-skinned and tender-hearted."

"Whaddatheygonna do? Take my job," she asks, slipping back into schtick. "Go ahead. Take it."