

DAILY NEWS

The doctor has a dream

By EDWARD EDELSON

IT'S THE SMALLEST specialty in medicine," said Dr. Alan Blum. "There are only about half a dozen or a dozen of us. And we aren't even organized—there's an element of friendly competition."

Blum's specialty is medical editing, which comes in somewhere far from neurosurgery as a way to get rich but has its own fund of satisfactions. Blum's bittersweet pleasure at the moment is his attempt to revivify the New York State Journal of Medicine, a bit of work that can reasonably be compared with the effort to turn the Mets into pennant contenders.

The ambition—nay, audacity—of Blum's self-created challenge is well understood by those who know where the power lies in the world of medical journals. He is the small grocer taking on Safeway, the corner store bucking Penney's.

It's true that there are lots of medical journals—probably too many—in this country. But most are edited for specialties, such as pediatrics or surgery. There are relatively few general-interest medical journals, designed to inform doctors in every specialty. The number that really count is even smaller.

In fact, the field is, in effect, dominated by two publications, the

New England Journal of Medicine and the Journal of the American Medical Association, both of which are published weekly. Blum's dream is that the New York State Journal will become a third to these two titans.

It is a goal that brought him back from Sydney, where he had settled in for what looked like a permanent job as editor of the Australian Journal of Medicine. In some ways, the Australian journal was a bigger challenge than the New York job. It was more or less moribund when Blum took it over, and there were unusual rewards in bringing it "back to life."

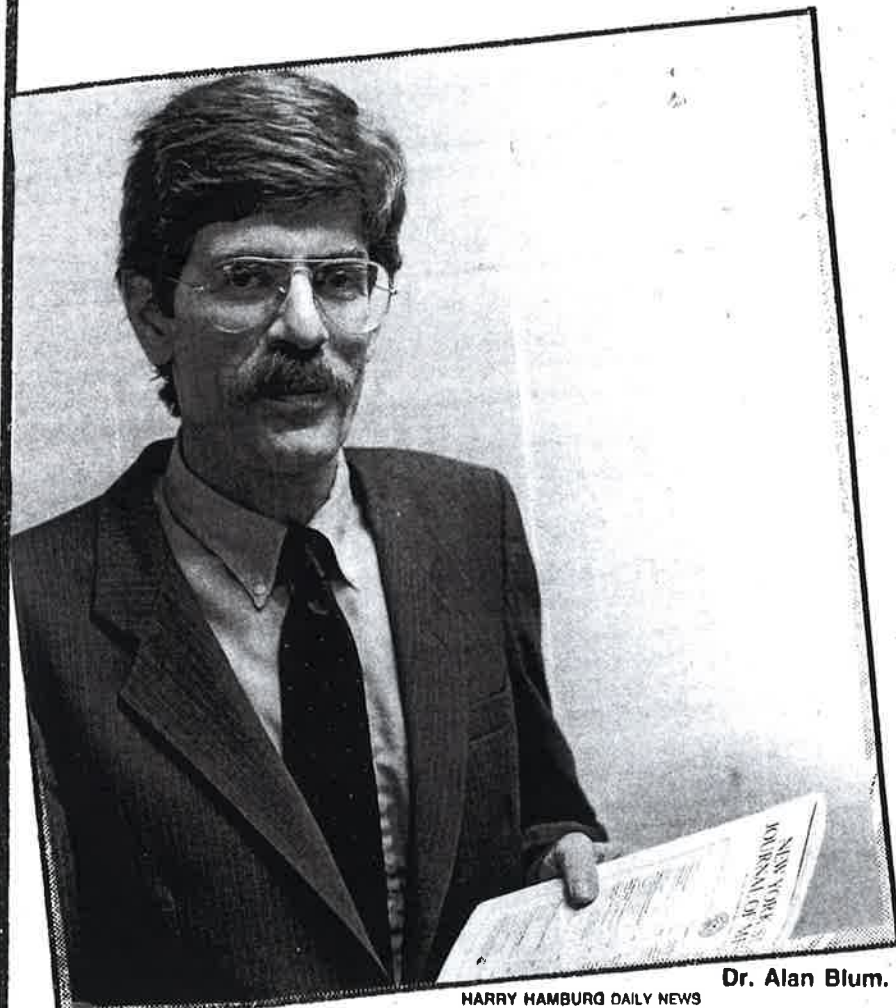
But the attraction of New York, where Blum's father, Leon, was in general practice for many years, was too strong.

"It was the lure of editing an independent journal that could be third or fourth in the United States," the 35-year-old Blum said.

The New York Journal traces its beginnings to 1807, to a publication called "Transactions of the Medical Society of the State of New York." It officially became a journal in 1901, when it began to appear fortnightly. It was cut back to a monthly in the early 1970s to save money.

Blum's plan is to bring the journal back to a fortnightly schedule, then to weekly publication. That

Continued on page M10



Dr. Alan Blum.

HARRY HAMBURG DAILY NEWS

The doctor has a dream

Continued from page M3

ambition is part of a larger plan to make the New York journal into a publication that doctors look forward to reading because its contents are important to them.

Journals flourish by printing papers about new and important research. The best journals publish the best papers about the most important research. There is a tight ring of mutual self-interest: Researchers get prestige by having their papers in the best journals, and journals get prestige by having papers from the best researchers. Blum's job is to break into that ring.

He acknowledges that it probably will take years to achieve his goal. The foundation of the present dominant position of the New England Journal of Medicine was laid in the 1940s, when its editor, Dr. Joseph Garland, began a long, patient effort to improve quality. Garland's work was carried on by his successor, Dr. Franz Ingelglinger. The present editor, Dr. Arnold S. Relman, enjoys the fruits of their decades of work.

Blum is at the very beginning of that process. He is, in fact the New York journal's first full-time physician-editor. He has added a deputy editor, a consultant on statistics, a new series of clinical conferences about complex diseases and diagnoses, and a medical writer who will comment on socioeconomic issues.

Blum is also riding the circuit, trying to persuade researchers that the New York journal is a good place to be published. It's a tough selling job, but he seems to enjoy it.

"I'm the only editor of a medical journal I know who wanted to be exactly that," Blum says.

Indeed, he once wanted to be a journalist, a thought that distressed his father. Alan Blum even applied to the Columbia Journalism School, and was prevented from going only because his application was late.

He was told to wait a year and apply again. Instead, he went to Emory Medical School in Atlanta. He interned at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal, finished his postgraduate medical education at the University of Miami—and never forgot his ambition to be a writer. It was helped along by a fellowship he spent at the Journal of the American Medical Association.

Then he saw a classified ad in the New England Journal of Medicine. Australia was looking for someone to edit its medical journal. Blum was one of about 80 applicants. He got the job, started work in January 1982, and was working up a proper head of steam when he got the phone call from New York. He hesitated, then got persuaded.

And here he is. One measure of where he is starting from is the current issue of the New York journal, which has just been sent to its 28,000 readers. The date on the cover is "July, August, September," the three months that Blum has been working to get a finished product that meets his standards.

And so he starts. Blum wants his journal to discuss subjects such as malpractice, medical legislation and politics, which he thinks do not get enough attention from most journals.