

Editorial—Nothing new under the sun

Occasionally, journals such as this receive papers from enthusiastic authors offering new and exciting research findings, only to be told by a wise old referee that all this had been done many years ago, even though it had been ignored since. Sometimes, journals such as this will publish papers which also describe findings already documented in the literature, but neither author, nor referee, nor the editor were aware of the existence of these other papers.

It can be very enlightening, not to say sobering, to take an old copy of any scientific journal and read its contents as though it was the latest issue. Chances are you will find a great many things that you thought you didn't know before, and you may even find the solutions to your current research problems in some unexpected places.

Even more instructive—and this is a course open only to those with access to a journal's editorial files—is to examine correspondence relating to the refereeing and editing of submitted papers. In this office, we try to avoid cluttering up our cupboards with past correspondence by having a clear-out after a decent interval. Of course, such exercises are fraught with dangers of becoming engrossed in old letters, as happened recently in disposing of referee and author letters of 1981; however, it also gives the opportunity to realize that some of our current problems are no different from those we had more than a decade ago—sometimes with the same correspondents!

On the whole, referee's come out better than authors. In fact, it is quite astonishing how many working scientists are prepared to spend time reading papers sent for review and patiently checking facts and logic in papers often destined to be rejected. It is ironic that an author may have his work more critically appraised at this stage than ever it is after it has been published.

If Dr Jekyll the Referee is patient and conscientious, then when he becomes Mr Hyde the Author, there can be a remarkable character change. Those who oppose the anonymity of referees on the grounds that it gives them too much licence to be rude or derogatory towards suffering defenceless authors should read some of the responses of authors to referees' reports. A thoughtful, constructive report from a referee trying to understand the author's thought processes may be met with a tirade, never mind whether the referee may be a distinguished professor of biochemistry, or a younger scientist genuinely trying to come to terms with a complex argument; the former, we would hope, is likely to have made some valid points, while the latter would at least be representative of the

potential readership expecting clarity of expression from his peers.

However, it must be emphasized that the majority of authors are grateful for referees' comments and usually do their best to accommodate them in their revisions. Even so, authors should realize that referees may sometimes be wrong, and blindly following their instructions in the expectation that satisfying the referee is the passport to convincing the Editor is not the right way forward. We must hope that the author reads the referee's report as carefully as the referee read his submission.

To return to my initial theme, it is the general comments of so many referees of the early 1980s that make this editor sigh with an air of resignation. We think that if we point out the obvious shortcoming of authors often enough, then eventually the scientific community will present well-constructed, well argued papers in the style of the journal and using the appropriate scientific conventions of the time. The following comments from our archives could well be from today's post.

"... the analytical methods are described superficially and then indicated as unpublished. It is not permissible to publish results first and methods later. Questions of specificity, quantitative variation and drug stability must be answered before the submitted work can be evaluated ..."

"... on reading this text, I find it far from clear what the authors are trying to tell us ..."

"... there is no statistical information to enable the reader to come to any conclusions about the results ..."

"... I reviewed (and rejected) this paper for another journal three months ago and the authors have neither altered the paper nor my opinion ..."

"... the discussion is overlong considering the amount of new results. The authors must examine the discussion carefully and confine ancillary references, which support or deny an important point ..."

"... the figures are difficult to understand as the axes are not labelled ..."

"... throughout the discussion, several suggestions are presented to explain the observed effects. Although these may well offer an explanation for the differences, it would have been of more value had the author pursued these suggestions by further experimentation ..."

It would be nice to think that the recurrence of these statements in referees' reports is not a reflection on the referees' lack of imagination, but on the whole, I fear it only confirms that there is indeed nothing new under the sun.

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