

## Editorial—Editors and Authors: Working Together

A recent correspondent to *Nature*, with tongue slightly in cheek, complained of the failure of most learned journals to deliver the promise of rapid refereeing and publication of research papers. The correspondent was writing from the point of view of the author and cited his own experience of two to three months for refereeing and a further four months between acceptance and publication. This is an interesting survey in that it gives the experience of one individual, presumably with submissions to a range of journals, rather than the usual survey of one particular journal's experience with a range of authors. It would indeed be interesting to see such 'personal' fingerprints and see whether there are such things as problem authors rather than problem referees or problem journals. The correspondent mentioned above does not say how much of the time in the two phases was due to the time the text spent back in his office, but one can assume that for someone who conscientiously keeps correspondence records for sixteen or more years, this was probably minimal!

The ability of journals to provide fast service that the author wants is a continuing problem. New journals are always springing up to fill a recognized niche, such as when subdisciplines become large and important enough to justify specialist journals. Such new journals are reasonably justified, but there is probably less justification for new journals whose only virtue, and main selling-point is that they will provide rapid publication of research results. For a time, the new journal will be able to deliver this promise, probably satisfying its first score or so clients, but eventually the demand to publish will outstrip its resources and the new journal will face the same problems in rapid publication as do the older established journals in the same field.

It is as well to recognize what these problems are. There is increasing pressure on academic scientists to publish their research work to ensure their survival. This leads to more and more papers being submitted to research journals. It is probably true that many papers are submitted reporting results that would not have been reported in such a form a few years ago. Papers of this type might include routine toxicity or pharmacological testing carried out on behalf of industry, but of little relevance to the advancement of basic science, or sometimes they may be piece-meal episodes of a much larger project which would be better served up as a substantial paper at the conclusion of the project. In fairness, all such papers need to be given hearing and may even be considered worthy of publication, but nevertheless they will consume resources that could be devoted to papers that really do say something new and deserve to be published at the first opportunity. The main result of the large number of papers submitted to any particular journal is that that journal eventually receives publishable papers at a greater rate than it can publish them; the publishing delay is not because the editorial staff is inefficient or the printer is slow, but almost entirely because of the queue that builds up. And this queue, we would like to think, is a greater problem with the journals most in demand as a scientist's publication vehicle.

The elimination of the queue is in the hands of both the

authors and the editor. The authors can vote with their feet by only sending their work to journals which can publish rapidly; the natural consequences of this are obvious. The editor can adopt a more stringent acceptance and rejection policy. In some fields of journalism, this is easily done by accepting enough articles, stories and fillers on a monthly basis, any material that does not make a particular issue is returned to the author so that each issue contains only freshly-minted material. Given the time constraints of finding referees and obtaining the author's revised versions, this is not a practical proposition for a research journal. I am sure that no author would be pleased to be rejected after going through the refereeing process only to be told there was no room for him this month.

The editor can be more stringent by excluding subjects on the fringe of the journal's interests, something easily done for a very specialist journal; however, the very title of this journal suggests the fringes are difficult to define. The editor can recognize that the queue must be eliminated and do this by maintaining an acceptance rate that is compatible with the journal's publication rate. This means, in turn, that papers which the peer-referee procedure has deemed worthy of publication may still be rejected by the editor, something which is unsatisfactory both to editor and author, and also to the referee who might conclude his opinion is ignored.

The above suggests the ways the editor and author can separately affect the rate at which new work can be published. The most satisfactory way, however, is for the editor and author to work together to this end. The author can help the editor by cutting out the submission of the least publishable unit, and submit only solid coherent work that has a beginning and an end.

The general reader of a journal may not appreciate how much the editor is responsible for ensuring value for money in a scientific journal. Apart from trying to ensure the best quality of research work is published by appropriate choice of referee, the editor also needs to control the verbosity of the author, cutting out such things as substantial literature surveys masquerading as introductions to specific well-defined pieces of research work, or detailed descriptions of experimental methods which have already been described elsewhere. Like all journals, we do insist that work should be described in sufficient detail that a well-informed person working in the same field, with access to similar equipment, should be able to repeat the work; however, this criterion represents a maximum requirement as well as a minimum. As I have mentioned before, many authors will let word-processors and graphics programs take over when they start to prepare a paper. Consideration of what is needed to present data or to make a point is still necessary and the space limitations of the journal should not be forgotten.

I hope these few thoughts will help authors understand the problems, and will allow us to continue with timely publication of worthwhile research in *The Journal of Pharmacy and Pharmacology*.