

Editorial

“Dear Sir” is a Necessary Part of Experimental Pharmacy and Pharmacology

Learned journals are usually described as peer-review journals. The term suggests that the research work contained within its pages has been rigorously assessed by the authors' peers in the same or related field and ensures that any such work reported has the imprimatur, not only of the editor and publisher, but of the scientific world in general. This is a very valuable system ensuring that the reader can have trust in the soundness of the work, and also giving recognition to the author whose work is published. Although authors may complain when papers are rejected on the strength of the opinions of his peers, for those papers that are finally accepted there is almost always an improvement in the published version. Part of the review process of course should involve a sensible dialogue enabling the author to stand his ground in the face of contrary opinions; this right of the author to his opinions must be respected, although the Editor has the final say in publication; I should add that the Editor has this role, not as a divine right, nor by papal dispensation, but because the Editor must feel comfortable with the work being published in the journal.

In a perfect world, the learned journal would then contain only perfectly good science, and one point of view would argue that this is what we should strive to achieve, using the very best expert referees, allowing only the most rigid statistical procedures, demanding full experimental details. But, as the perfectly safe aeroplane is the one that never leaves the ground, the perfect scientific paper would probably break no new ground or be allowed outrageous statements. There must then be some room for authors to express views contrary to the conventional ones. I am not suggesting that the peer-review system does not allow radical ideas; some work should not appear in the scientific literature because the author has not grasped the principals or ideas behind his experiments, resulting in poor science. The referee and Editor may have a responsibility in protecting the author from his own ignorance. However, where the author fully appreciates why his ideas are seemingly being rejected, yet believes in the new ideas presented, then publication followed by vigorous public debate

and further experimentation by others can only be good for scientific progress.

Perhaps one step down from the peer-reviewed, but still controversial, paper that the editor will allow to go forward is to be found in ideas and opinions that do not claim to be rigorous research according to all the modern guidelines of good something or other practice. These may comprise snippets of ideas that do not pretend to change the big picture, but in some way need expression and discussion. Such papers may fall at the first hurdle of publication as being too slight, or not written according to convention. I believe that the section this Journal calls Letters to the Editor is a suitable vehicle for this type of communication. The Editor can take these almost as personal letters. In this issue of the *Journal of Pharmacy and Pharmacology*, we publish two such letters, quite different in type, but both capable of causing further discussion or even controversy. The Letter from Professor Frederick Strong, may be completely unacceptable to some on the grounds of lack of placebo controls or insufficient subjects, amongst others. Nevertheless, such observations are not without value without claiming to contain absolute scientific proof.

The Letter from Professor Antonio Marzo probably does not contain any new messages; how often do authors need to be told that statisticians and pharmacokineticists need to be consulted before the experiment is performed, not after? Nevertheless, the points made by Professor Marzo need to be continually emphasized or even challenged. My own feeling regarding some of Professor Marzo's advice is that the scientific world should not need to be told by a regulatory agency how to carry out proper scientific work; surely the well-trained, experienced scientist should be capable of devising the experiment to produce the desired information (as opposed to the desired result!).

I would like to see more Letters to the Editor of this type. The correspondence pages should be a lively and vital part of the Journal, an opportunity to propose new ideas – or to refute them.

JOSEPH CHAMBERLAIN