A New Millennium and a New Editor

It is both an honor and a privilege to become the 12th editor of *The American Journal of Human Genetics*. As we move into the new millennium, human genetics will continue to play an increasingly important and pervasive role in medicine and biology, and the *Journal* will continue to be our record of these historical times. I hope to maintain the course steered by our previous editors, with the focus of the *Journal* continuing to be the publication of the very best our field has to offer, as well as preservation of the richness of experimental diversity; the *Journal* is unique among similar journals for reporting such a breadth of scientific inquiry in human genetics. Soon we will have the draft euchromatic sequence of the human genome, which will forever change how the study of normal and abnormal variation in humans is carried out. Indeed, the next 5 years should illuminate the power of genomic-based analysis, and it will truly be an exciting time to be a human geneticist.

Editorial change is healthy, since it allows a fresh look at all aspects of the *Journal*. I am extremely fortunate to be taking over a journal with few, if any, problems. The past 5 years have led to unparalleled growth in the *Journal*. Peter Byers not only oversaw the manuscript review process at a time when the *Journal* enjoyed the receipt of many more high-quality manuscripts than it could ever hope to publish (not a trivial feat, as I am rapidly discovering), but he fundamentally changed the *Journal* for the better. The speed of publication, the commodity of all top-flight journals, has substantially increased under Peter's stewardship. Moreover, he has set in motion further changes, chiefly with The University of Chicago Press, that will continue to diminish the time from submission to publication, long after his tenure as editor has expired. Peter also led the *Journal* into the electronic era, as it became one of the first biomedical journals to publish articles electronically long before the entire issue was ready for press. His mark on the *Journal* will be indelible.

Peter and his staff, principally Roberta Wilkes and John Ashkenas, have made the transition of the editorial offices over 2,000 miles a relatively painless process. Following Peter's example of hiring Roberta away from the then dean of medicine at the University of Washington, I was fortunate to attract the new managing editor, Cathy Alden, away from my executive vice president for health affairs. Both hirings clearly made the upper administrations well aware of the presence of the *Journal* at their institutions. Cathy and I have now assembled what should prove to be a very able team in the editorial office that includes Carissa Craig as the assistant managing editor and Dr. Kathryn Beauregard as the editorial fellow. I am pleased to report that the Atlanta office is running relatively smoothly despite my inexperience running a major journal. Thank you, Peter.

Although the *Journal* is not in need of fixing, we cannot help but tinker with it slightly to make it, we hope, more user friendly. First are format changes. Our "Letters to the Editor" section has metamorphosed into short reports on original studies. Although this is a natural evolution in many journals, it has somewhat obscured the more traditional role of the "Letters" section, such as commentary on previously published papers as well as a general forum on issues of importance to our society or to human genetics in general. Accordingly, we will now initiate a "Reports" section for the presentation of brief original research of particular timeliness and significance. The format will remain essentially the same as the "Letters" section (i.e., no subdivisions within the text) but will be limited to four journal pages, including the addition of a 200-word abstract. This will allow better access to the data, by providing the abstracts when PubMed searches are performed. The "Letters to the Editor" section will remain but no longer will include letters reporting original research.

A second change being instituted in the *Journal* are modifications aimed at improving our speed of publication, both in real time and in perception. The dates from submission to publication are carefully scrutinized by authors when they are deciding where to submit. We at the *Journal* must diminish this interval by examining new submissions quickly and, if they are appropriate for the *Journal,* by rapidly soliciting reviewers. Your part, as reviewers, will be to help speed up this process, without compromising scientific evaluation. We have now established a 10-day turnaround for reviews; although this is not always possible, it is the goal that we strive for. Ideally, an author should be able to receive the reviews and editorial decision within 2 weeks. With The University of Chicago Press, our goal is to be able to electronically publish an accepted, final manuscript within 3 weeks. Thus, without revision, we should be able to routinely go from submission to publication in 35 days. Of course, manuscripts are almost never accepted without revision. The time of revision is a period largely out of the control of the editorial office and is the authors' responsibility. In the past, we have been more than generous with revision time, with some au-

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thors taking nearly a year for revision. Obviously, a few such papers could wreak havoc with our submission-to-publication interval. Given the pace of human genetics research, the level of significance of a manuscript dramatically changes over a period of only a couple of months. Therefore, we will allow, in general, only 4 weeks for return of a revised manuscript. If additional experimentation is required, this time period can be extended, but for no more than a total of 8 weeks; after that time, the manuscript must be resubmitted as a new contribution. This will be without prejudice to the newly submitted manuscript, although such manuscripts will likely require rereview. This change alone should place the *Journal* among the most expedited journals in the field.

To allow even more rapid publication of the occasional superior article/report of extremely high significance and timeliness, we will institute a fast-track format. For manuscripts of such significance, we will perform a 24–48-hour review, after discussion, between the editor and the corresponding author, regarding the suitability of the manuscript for this track. We have already had our first experiences with this track, resulting in one instance in which the reviews were sent back to the authors for revision within 20 hours of receipt of the manuscript. It is anticipated that very few manuscripts will reach this level of significance, and suitability will not be judged solely on competitive issues but, rather, on the impact that the finding has on the field in general. For those papers judged suitable and scientifically sound, the entire process will be expedited, moving the completed manuscript in the front of the queue for publication. Given the burden that such manuscripts represent for the editorial office and the reviewers, who will be drawn mostly from the ranks of the associate editors, authors would be well advised to carefully and objectively consider the suitability of identifying such a manuscript before contacting the editor.

As the field of human genetics moves into the new millennium, the *Journal* must be flexible as the functional genomics and proteomics become more central in the study of human variation. Since the experimental dissection of function often requires in vivo studies, sometimes not possible in humans, we will welcome papers utilizing model organisms to address questions central to human and medical genetics. Although these papers will most often involve mice, we anticipate that the yeast, worm, and fly will become more prevalent in human genetic inquiry. The clear relationship of such studies to the human will be mandatory, and, in particular, the conclusions drawn from such studies must directly add to our knowledge of the human condition, in order to be appropriate for publication in the *Journal*.

As the number of quality papers submitted steadily increases (fig. 1) the *Journal* must become increasingly

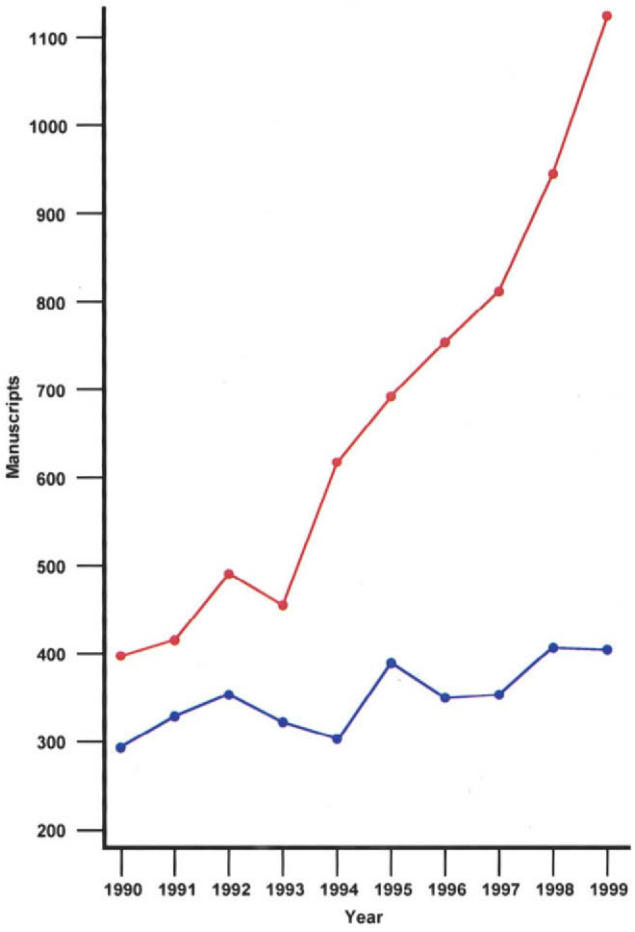

Figure 1 Submission and publication statistics for the past decade. The number of submissions to the *Journal* is shown in red, and the total number of articles and letters published is shown in blue.

selective. As a practical matter, the number of pages published has reached the limit of both fiscal and personnel constraints. More importantly, our success allows our selectivity to increase such that papers considered for review must demonstrate a significant increase in knowledge, beyond simple incremental advances. Papers reporting essentially negative data will join papers of simple mutational reports, in not meeting the minimal competitive level for consideration, and will be returned without review unless they clearly demonstrate marked significance. Likewise, linkage papers will receive greater scrutiny such that manuscripts with overly large mapping intervals or exceedingly rare conditions (i.e., a single family known with the disorder) may not reach sufficient priority unless they are of compelling interest and significance. Manuscripts reporting statistical or population studies should also go well beyond incremental advances, reporting data or approaches of substantial impact. This is not to say that contributions declined by

the editorial office are not worthy of publication. Since we can publish only approximately 20%–30% of the manuscripts received, and since a rough guess might be that just 10% or so of the received manuscripts are scientifically unsuitable or of limited interest to the readership, we must therefore decline an astounding 60%–70% of manuscripts that report well-done studies and that are of interest and utility to those working in the field. However, as we rise to the top tier of genetics journals, we unfortunately must refer such manuscripts to the many other fine journals within our field. Thus, priority and balance among the manuscripts become increasingly important issues relating to significance of publication. Thus, authors would be well advised to carefully craft their manuscripts to impart the major significance and general interest of their findings to the reader. As always, clearly written manuscripts telling a compelling story fare best.

The next few years will not be without controversy and challenges for biomedical publications. The development of PubMed Central as a repository for electronic versions of journals will be a significant issue in the coming months. On the one hand, PubMed Central will allow open and readily accessible access to journals and, importantly, to the cited references themselves. This clearly would be a major advance in how we and our colleagues carry out our work. On the other hand, such open access could lead to a loss of library subscriptions and the derived revenue. The process of putting together the *Journal* is a costly endeavor, and, without this revenue stream, page charges to authors could escalate to dizzying heights. We will strive to do the right thing professionally while maintaining a sense of fiduciary responsibility for the *Journal.* To this end, Peter Byers and I have decided to make the electronic version of the *Journal* open to everyone, over the Web, 1 year after publication. We believe that this will have little impact on our subscription base and yet will provide everyone complete access to the *Journal,* within 1 year of the issue publication. We can therefore be proud that our *Journal* was among the first to be available as an electronic journal and that it now is also among very few journals with open Web access after defined publication intervals. We will continue to take advantage of Web-based capabilities, as we have with transmittal of galley proofs to authors electronically. We anticipate that in the coming year, for example, peer review will be carried out largely electronically, as will manuscript submission.

So, we move on together into the year 2000 and can look forward to tremendous advances in human genetics and to the recording of those advances in our *Journal.* Although the declaration of the golden age of genetics is now decades old, I, for one, believe the best is yet to come.

Stephen T. Warren
Editor