

## *Editors of dermatological journals*

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### *On editors*

The names of important persons in this field have figured in many ways. They have been honored eponymously (1) and as pioneers in their field of work (2). This has made us probe into another set of people of both sexes who have rendered an invaluable contribution by performing the thankless job of serving as journal editors. Journals that meet a given standard are not only widely read, but also looked upon as the ultimate source of information when textbooks fail to provide the answer. Naturally, the people who edit these journals spend time and effort to ensure that the journal continues to serve the special needs of the readers. This is not an easy task when one realizes the volume of work that is undertaken in the editorial office. Fewer still are aware of the editors of journals. Only a few dermatology journals, such as the American Journal of Dermatopathology list in their editions the past Editors, and similarly only a few of them, such as the American Journal of Contact Dermatitis and the Journal of Dermatologic Science (3), list the past Editors on their web site. Even stranger is the fact that even the members of editorial offices may not know their previous editors.

There is also considerable difference in the way an editor is selected for a particular journal. The rules and practices (10-12) concerning the nomination of Editors are not rigid and uniform. The majority of journals are published by societies, such as the International Journal of Dermatology which is published by the International Society of Dermatology (ISD) or the Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology which is published

by the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD), and Pediatric Dermatology by the Society of Pediatric Dermatology (SPD). The eligibility criteria and term of office of the Editor vary from journal to journal.

### *The duties of an editor*

There are quantitative tools for ranking, evaluating, categorizing, and comparing journals. One of these is the impact factor, defined as the average number of current citations of articles made in the year in which they are published. The other is the immediacy index, defined as the average number of times that current articles are cited in the year in which they are published.

Impact factor is considered to be the main tool in assessing the quality of a journal, so a major priority for Editors is to see this number rise (13). Their principal task is to select coeditors, members of the Editorial Board and appropriate reviewers for the journal. These people should be able to do their work within a given time limit. Also, her/his duty is to organize the Editorial Office and to chair its sessions. The editor should supervise the journal's response to appeals, complaints or suggestions from readers and to keep an eye out for ethical problems such as duplicate publication, scientific fraud, conflicts of interests etc. In general, his or her responsibilities lie in maintaining the scientific quality of the journal while improving its readability. The peer review system is intended to help the Editor to select the best papers and to prepare them for print. Readers

ought to be advised to be selective in what they read and skeptical in what they believe (14).

Editors should not only be experts but also sensitive to the needs of the readers. This calls for sound judgment in the acceptance of articles, and for editorials and reviews that touch on current issues. This is reflected in the impact factor, immediacy index and other indices of publication.

It is expected for Editors to be helpful to young authors by giving assistance as they prepare their manuscripts. They have not only to accept comments about his/her mistakes, that could have been avoided, but also to publish comments, like Bernhard (15) who accepted making spelling mistakes in his article.

The Editor's duty is also to clarify matters when two different opinions are put forward. At times, this may not be possible. This is illustrated in brachioradial pruritus, (16) where one author believed that it was due to nerve affection and the other blamed the sun. The editor solved the issue by simply stating that both factors were responsible for the disease.

A range of additional functions include setting the acceptance criteria and selecting the best papers (17), reviewing policies for the journal and its supplements (18), guiding inexperienced authors in proper writing (19) and an acceptable submission (20-21), and to make steps towards the continuous improvement in the quality of the journal.

## *When editors go astray*

Although not documented, editors may make mistakes by failing to bring attention to conflict of interest with either commercial entities or the members of the society sponsoring the journal. Similarly, one may also agree to publish the article of the editor of another journal in exchange for a similar favor in the other journal. Some articles are published in this manner, bypassing peer review.

In addition, editors may tend to reject manuscripts with lesser interest to readers or those without significant statistical significance in their findings. This causes a publication bias (22, 23).

It is possible that an editor may use the journal to publish his/her views and articles without caring for the general interest of readers and other authors. It has also been pointed out that editors may ask the authors for co authorship (24).

## *Current situation*

An editor's role is to edit, which means to publish the best evidence and promote science. He/she has to alter, adapt or refine the manuscripts as well as to advise and tutor young authors. It is here that the right choice must

be made to ensure excellence in publication. Training courses should be given to editors to improve their performance, as has been initiated by the British Medical Journal Publishing Group. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) (25) is a body consisting of medical journal editors whose members meet annually, and whose activities are founded on the Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts. The ICMJE invites comments on this document and suggestions for items to be included in their agenda. The official version of the Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals is located on its web site. Similar associations exist to address the problems faced by editors such as the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) (26), the Council of Science Editors (CSE) (27), and the European Association for Science Editors (EASE) (28). Through these associations important issues are discussed, such as the reporting of randomized drug trials in journals (29). WAME is probably the most active, including more than one thousand editors from around the world, and the membership is free of charge. An international e-communication system sponsored by the National Library of Medicine enables regular communication. Bruce Squires (Canada) deserves the credit for founding WAME.

Each year editors of several dermatological journals meet to discuss points of mutual interest during the Annual Meetings of the AAD (30). Topics range from dual publications to the use of a reference manager, which is valuable software for gathering references and organizing manuscripts (30).

The process of reviewing poses a very serious problem: it is difficult to find competent persons, and only a few journals can afford to pay them.

We think that the establishment of an Association for Dermatology Editors like WAME, has given sufficient evidence of the value of such organizations for dermatology, and in particular to dermatological journals. The objectives of such an association should include organizing courses for Editors, and the promotion of good editorial practice.

## *Conclusion*

Journals disseminate knowledge, but the primary responsibility for its originality, application and authenticity rests with the author(s). The lay press may also compete with scientific journals in announcing information of public interest. Today we are witnessing an unchecked growth of journals that do not necessarily keep pace with scientific progress but exist to satisfy personal ambitions and various commercial interests (24). Fame, the appearance of one's name in print and related journals promotes this situation (24). These must be restricted in the interest both of readers and of the publication of important studies. Some journals such as the Lancet and the Journal of Investigative Dermatol-

ogy publish highlights of leading papers at the beginning of each issue in clear language inviting readers to browse articles that should follow a similar pattern (31). Short and comprehensible and Letters to the Editor should be encouraged. Allowing multiple submissions, but not duplicate publication (31) is suggested but this is obviously against the policy of the leading journals.

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