Editorial

Of humour, music, anger, speed, and excuses: reflections of an editorial team after one year in office

When we took up editorial office, the editor of a well known cardiac journal commented: "as editors you might not learn much about cardiology but sure as hell you will learn a lot about your fellow man". Our editorial manifesto a year ago, declared our intent to make Cardiovascular Research an authors' journal by responding to the unquestioned demand for rapid decisions, constructive review procedure and speedy publication. Have we succeeded?

Rapidity of review
We have gone to great lengths to accelerate the review process. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the response time for our first 1585 reviewers' reports. The distribution is clearly skewed to the right – typical of a Poisson distribution which describes a subset of "rare" events occurring at random. However, the median of the review times is about 15 days (a mean of 18.5 days) – substantially faster than any other major cardiac research journal, despite our sending each manuscript to two or three international reviewers. The fact that we offer speedy reviewers a small gift (a scientific monograph or a compact disc of classical or popular music) in recognition of the enormous amount of work involved in a thorough manuscript review might possibly have influenced the shape of fig 1 – the sharp peak just before 21 days corresponds to our deadline for this gift!

Editorial decisions and submission rates
We pledged ourselves to reach an editorial decision on most manuscripts within 42 days of receipt – this we achieved with more than 96% of our first 500 manuscripts (fig 2). A few (<5%) did slip through the net (the longest time was 50 days) but despite this, our mean time to decision was only 25.3 days. For any journal, the time to an editorial decision is usually determined by the slowest reviewer. At Cardiovascular Research, tardy reviewers are hunted, harassed, and cajoled by the associate editors as our self imposed 42 day deadline approaches – thus explaining the second peak in fig 2 at 42 days.

Perhaps because of the rapidity of our review and decision making processes the number of manuscripts received each week increased by over 350% during the first six months of 1992 – which of course has made life even more hectic in the editorial office.

Music, art, and cardiology
Our reviewer database has allowed us to discover new, and perhaps unexpected, facts about the cardiovascular community and its musical taste. With a selection of over 30 recordings available, 64% of our reviewers opt for classical music; without doubt Mozart is the most popular composer, being chosen by more than one third. Wolfgang Amadeus is followed by Vivaldi and, well behind his Four Seasons, are works by Brahms, Stravinsky, and Beethoven. Of our other reviewers, 21% blast manuscripts to the music of Louis Armstrong and Frank Sinatra, with Fats Waller and Chuck Berry also being very popular – especially with specialist reviewers for heart failure and arrhythmias. The relationship between the reviewer's musical taste and the tendency to recommend rejection remains an editorial secret. The
remaining 15% or our reviewers choose a book, and finally, 0.35% of our reviewers (n=3) decline the gift as a matter of principle.

In addition to supporting the beleaguered recording industry, *Cardiovascular Research* has also introduced an element of art into its format. Students from various art colleges have been asked to design individual monograms composed of the initials of the first author; these now appear at the end of each paper. We plan to introduce other links between cardiology and the visual arts in the coming months.

**Carnegie Hall, Operation Desert Storm, pregnancy, and other excuses**

Not all reviewers make the 21 day deadline – perhaps because they don’t like music or (like the Editor-in-Chief) haven’t got a CD player. One reviewer, a well recognised violinist in his own right, attempted to excuse his late review on the grounds that he was giving a concert in New York’s Carnegie Hall – he faxed us the review of this instead of his report on the manuscript! Such was the excellence of the review (the musical one that is) that our tardy reviewer was given an extended deadline and a CD.

Authors are also a source of collectable anecdotes. One, anxious to see his work published as soon as possible, wrote: “I deeply appreciate the efforts of my associate who finished the experiments after I was called to military duty for Operation Desert Storm”. It’s not only reviewers who contribute to slow publication times – sometimes the authors themselves are the greater offenders. To eliminate problems of this nature, *Cardiovascular Research* gives authors a deadline for the revision of a manuscript – the return of an appropriately revised text within 42 days ensures that a manuscript remains on a fast track publication schedule. Our authors appear to have great powers of creativity in attempting to circumvent these deadlines, A letter from a well known (for tennis and electrophysiology) investigator implored the editorial team to extend the fast track deadline by a few days as there were extenuating circumstances; the fax stated: “The first author had recently delivered a baby during this time and her schedule was no longer her own – are there any provisions for maternity leave in your fast track deadlines?” The editorial board were compassionate – which is more than can be said for some reviewers about authors and vice versa.

**Love and respect**

Strong emotions and some wonderful turns of phrase can emerge from behind the shield of anonymity. Said one reviewer: “This is a huge edifice of a hypothesis, based on a very simple methodology and a Dali-like imagination”. One renowned electrophysiologist responding to an adverse review by another world famous electrophysiologist stated: “The reviewer clearly doesn’t know anything about electrophysiology . . . why try to persuade the Pope to accept evolution theory if he sticks to the dogma that the world was created in seven days . . . the criticism is like saying that every individual has its own specific genome but questioning whether this is also true during sleep!” The editorial team was not quite sure how this related to the ATP sensitive potassium channel. Another electrophysiologist (why does it always seem to be electrophysiologists?) complained of his eminent electrophysiological reviewer: “Many of the ‘problems’ he has with the manuscript appear to stem from his limited understanding of electrophysiology or from our failure to explain observations at a more basic level”.

The cloak of anonymity

The advantages and disadvantages of anonymity of the review process have preoccupied authors and editors for decades – at present *Cardiovascular Research* is undertaking a survey of 500 authors and reviewers, seeking their view on this important issue. The results are to be published in October 1993 along with a special editorial on the subject by A. Fabiato – it is hoped that this, like several of this year’s provocative “Viewpoint” articles, will arouse debate and stimulate correspondence in the journal.

**Correspondence and corrections**

At times when the editorial office is under pressure, our authors can be guaranteed to help lift our spirits. A corresponding author wrote from Osaka: “The English glammer in the manuscript has been full-collected and we await the gallery proofs”. Sometimes, revision leads to requests for further revision and the patience of the author declines exponentially; we gratefully acknowledge Roy Baumeister of Case Western Reserve University for allowing us to reproduce the following letter:

Dear Sir, Madam or Other,

Enclosed is our latest version of Ms CVR-02-22-R.R.R.R, that is, the re-re-re-revised review of our paper. Choke on it! We have again rewritten the entire manuscript from start to finish. We even changed the goddamn running head! Hopefully, we have suffered enough by now to satisfy even you and your bloodthirsty reviewers.

I shall skip the usual point-by-point description of every single change we made in response to the critiques. After all, it is fairly clear that your reviewers are less interested in details of scientific procedure than in working out their personality problems and sexual frustrations by seeking some kind of demented glee in the sadistic and arbitrary exercise of tyrannical power over hapless authors like ourselves who happen to fall into their clutches. We do understand that, in view of the misanthropic psychopathology prevalent on your Editorial Board, you need to keep sending these papers, for if they weren’t reviewing manuscripts they’d probably be out mugging old ladies or clubbing baby seals to death. Still, from this batch of reviewers, C was clearly the most hostile, and we request that you do not ask him or her to review this revision. Indeed, we have mailed letter bombs to four or five people we suspected of being reviewer C, so if you send the manuscript back to them the review process could be unduly delayed.

Some of the reviewers’ comments, we couldn’t do anything about. For example, if (as reviewer C suggested) several of my recent ancestors were indeed drawn from other species, it is too late to change that. Other suggestions were implemented, however, and the paper has improved and benefitted. Thus, you suggested that we shorten the manuscript by 5 pages, and we were able to accomplish this very effectively by altering the margins and printing the paper in a different font with a smaller typeface. We agree with you that the paper is much better this way.

One perplexing problem was dealing with suggestion #13-2B by Reviewer B. As you may recall (that is, if you even bother reading the reviews before doing your decision letter), that reviewer listed 16 works that he/she felt we should cite in this paper. These were on a variety of different topics, none of which had any relevance to our work that we could see. Indeed, one was an essay on the Spanish-American War from a high school literary magazine. The only common thread was that all 16 were by the same author, presumably someone whom Reviewer B greatly admires and feels should be more widely cited. To handle this, we have modified the introduction and added, after the review of relevant literature, a subsection entitled “Review of Irrelevant Literature” that discusses these articles and also duly
addresses some of the more asinine suggestions in the other reviews.

We hope that you will be pleased with this revision and will finally recognise how urgently deserving of publication this work is. If not, then you are an unscrupulous, depraved monster with no shred of human decency. You ought to be in a cage. May whatever heritage you come from be the butt of the next round of ethnic jokes. If you do accept it, however, we wish to thank you for your patience and wisdom throughout this process and to express our appreciation of your scholarly insights. To repay you, we would be happy to review some manuscripts for you; please send us the next manuscript that any of these reviewers submits to your Journal.

Assuming you accept this paper, we would also like to add a footnote acknowledging your help with this manuscript and to point out that we liked the paper much better the way we originally wrote it but you held the Editorial shotgun to our heads and forced us to chop, resuffle, restate, hedge, expand, shorten and, in general, convert a meaty paper into stir-fried vegetables. We couldn’t or wouldn’t have done it without your input.

Sincerely,
Roy F. Baumeister
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This letter “Dear Journal Editor, it’s me again” is reprinted by kind permission of the author from Dialogue, the newsletter for the Society for Personality and Social Psychology.

Phones and faxes

The fax and the phone have helped us greatly in achieving a rapid turn around of manuscripts – they have also entertained us. The following is a transcript of a call from a city in North America – with minor changes to protect the author’s identity:

“Hello, is that Cardiovascular Research?”
“Yes, what can we do for you?”
“This is ‘Dr Ryan O’Dene’, it’s about my manuscript – I’d like to withdraw it.”
“But why, the reviewer’s criticisms were not that bad were they?”
“It’s not that, the bloody thing is in the press already.”
“What – you mean you sent it to two journals?”

“No – not exactly.”
“Well what then?”
“We sent it to another journal months ago and it was rejected.”
“Well that’s OK then isn’t it?”
“No.”
“No? Why?”
“Well we thought the reviewers were talking crap so we wrote to the Editor demanding satisfaction – we heard nothing so we sent the manuscript to you.”
“Thanks! So we were a poor second choice – but I still don’t see the problem.”
“Well, after we submitted the work to you (we really love your Journal by the way, I can’t understand why we didn’t think of you first . . .)”
“Well after we’d submitted it, the Editor of the other Journal wrote to us and . . .”
“And what?”
“And said we were right.”
“Oh.”
“Yes, well he said he’d sent the manuscript to a new reviewer who loved the work and . . .”
“And what?”
“And the manuscript has been sent to press.”
“Oh.”
“Yeah, well, sorry, what can I say?”
“David’s going to be dining out on this one!”
“Oh sh*t!”
“I expect he’ll write about it in his end of the year Editorial.”
“The ba***rd – he wouldn’t . . . would he?”

Thanks

During the past 12 months the editorial office has also received many warm and encouraging letters (and telephone calls) from authors and reviewers alike. We are very appreciative of these gestures as indeed we are of the cooperation and help of all our authors and reviewers (acknowledged with our grateful thanks at the end of this issue). Without good manuscripts, high quality reviews, and the goodwill of the research community no journal can thrive – we thank all of our contributors and friends for what has been an exciting year and we wish you all success for 1993.

DAVID HEARSE AND THE EDITORIAL TEAM