In honour of the fortieth anniversary of Cardiovascular Research, I was approached by the Editorial Team of the Journal to relate some of my experiences as Editor-in-Chief from 1995 to 2002. The following is a collection of memories and observations that may be interesting to editors, reviewers, and authors alike.

The initial months of our editorial term were very hectic. On the one hand this was due to the very short time we had to prepare ourselves, to find a team of associate editors, journal managers, an office, furniture, computers, but, above all a working Manuscript Tracking System. The version we got was brand-new and full of bugs. It behaved like a child who in rapid succession suffered from every known, and unknown, paediatric disease, from mumps to measles. We had adopted many of my predecessor David Hearse’s innovations (rapid review, three reviewers, a reward in the form of a compact disk when reviewers met the deadline of 3 weeks, publication of Spotlight Issues devoted to a single topic, etc.) and had received a list of reviewers. Our own innovation was a list of specific keywords, designed by Ruben Coronel and Jan W.T. Fiolet, which was sent to all reviewers, who dutifully returned it. The problems arose when we clicked in the keywords in the Manuscript Tracking System. All of us spent countless evenings and weekends to assign the keywords to the reviewers, and about twice a week the system crashed. All data went down the drain, and the hard disk had to be sent to England. We must have ticked in the keywords of Dr Abd-El Fatah (we did it alphabetically) a dozen times (with Dr Zipes, we had less problems). Meanwhile, as regularly as the sun came up, the manuscripts poured in, and the walls of the office were covered with paper on which the fate of the manuscripts was graphically depicted. This state of affairs lasted a few months and nearly drove us crazy. Fortunately, our little baby finally recovered and the system started to work smoothly.

A second problem was the Journal Managers. It took us a few years before we found the ideal people. Good Journal Managers are worth their weight in gold. Praise the Lord for David Hearse’s Rita Coetzee, praise the Lord for Michael Piper’s Elizabeth Martinson, and praise the Lord for our own Yvonne Zwiers, Joosje Bakker, and Marianne van der Linde.

Many people told me how nice it must be to be an editor because one can read all those manuscripts before they are published. In fact, one rarely reads the whole manuscript. There simply is no time. You read the title and the abstract. It is remarkable that often, authors don’t seem to spend much time writing the abstract. Title and abstract are the most widely read parts of a paper. Editors decide on the basis of the abstract which reviewers they will ask, reviewers decide on the basis of the abstract whether or not they will comply with our request (we routinely sent the abstract to eight prospective reviewers, in the hope that three would be willing to review; very often, we had to ask many more reviewers). It is therefore important to spend time to think how to convey the core message of one’s study in a concise, clear way, preferentially without using too many abbreviations. What to think of a title like this: “SL65.0472, a 5-HT1B/5-HT2A receptor antagonist, improves distal perfusion after lower limb ischemia in the fatty Zucker rat”. Why not simply: “A serotonin antagonist etc.” People interested in the fatty Zucker rat will then know what the study is about.

How about the following conclusion in an abstract: “Average cholesterol concentration was significantly higher in patients AGT-TT+ APOEpsilon34/44 than in those TM/
MM + 34/44 or TT + 23/33”. It is very unlikely that on the day we received this manuscript I would, upon coming home, say to my wife: “Guess what, darling? Cholesterol is higher in patients AGT-TT + APOEepsilon34/44 than in those TM/MM + 34/44 or TT + 23/33!” And it is even more unlikely that she would say: “How exciting, dear”.

Sometimes, a conclusion borders on the surrealistic: “Upregulation of eNOSmRNA and protein level by NIC that is inhibited by GLB was demonstrated in normotensive conscious rat hearts”. One just hopes the rat hearts gave informed consent.

Another merry moment was provided by this statement: “Brown detected, after LSD treatment, by in-situ hybridization, striking regional and cellular differences in the rabbit spinal cord”. Was it Dr Brown or the rabbits that had the LSD treatment?

A different source of amusement can be found in the use of pompous words. Many authors are apparently afraid that the use of plain English words somehow detracts from the importance of their study. Therefore, they use words such as “paediatric patient” instead of “child”, “sacrificed” (on the altar of science?) or “euthanized” instead of “killed”, “it could be hypothesized” instead of “might”. More examples (true meaning in parentheses): in this point of time (now); in our opinion it is not an unjustifiable assumption that (we think); accounted for by the fact that (because); has the capability to (can); in close proximity to (near); it may, however, be noted (but).

Is language important for acceptance of a manuscript? Dr Robert Coates, a professor of English at the University of Brescia, together with his colleagues analysed 120 manuscripts purely on the basis of language errors. I had sent them 15 submitted papers from 8 different countries each after removing everything that could indicate from which country they were. Although the sample size was probably too small to draw definitive conclusions, there was a “clear indication that badly written articles correlated with a high rejection rate” [1]. Interestingly, the papers from authors from the US and UK had an almost identical acceptance rate and overall “error” rate. Their error rate was lowest and the acceptance rate highest (in the order of 30%). The lowest acceptance rate was 9%, and the papers from this country had also the highest error rate. Thus, it seems that it pays to pay attention to language.

Every reviewer has to suppress his or her irritation when reading a badly written paper and must make a huge effort to detect the grains of scientific gold hidden in a mass of poorly constructed sentences. During the almost eight years of our term, we received over 20,000 reports from reviewers. Some colleagues suggested to me that, instead of giving them a compact disk as a show of appreciation, I should give each reviewer a fee of 500 US $. Had I followed that advice, I would now have a debt of $10 million. When Brian F. Hoffman was Editor of Circulation Research, he told me: “If you are a lawyer preparing a difficult case for the Supreme Court, and you would ask the advice of a colleague, you will get it at the price of $500. I ask the advice of the scientific experts in the world, and they give it for free”. Our reviewers were truly the backbone of our Journal, and “it may be remembered that ours is the only profession where the world’s experts give their advice for free... It is worthwhile to note that the comments of the reviewers are primarily meant to improve the manuscript. Overall, the reviewers recommended rejection of the manuscript in only 23% of cases. Since we rejected more than 80%, the blame is clearly on us, not on the reviewers” [2].

Reviewers do have biases. Opthof et al. [3] analyzed 8313 reviewer–manuscript interactions. The overall priority score was set at 100%. It appeared that when a French reviewer reviewed a French manuscript, the priority score was 165%, but when the manuscript was not French, the score was 92%. For the UK these figures were 145% and 80%. Thus, one might conclude that reviewers favour papers from their own country. However, Italian reviewers gave their compatriots a priority score of only 52%, and non-Italian manuscripts a score of 98%. I am not sure whether this geographical bias holds only for Cardiovascular Research, and I am also not sure whether editors should take this into account. After all, reviewers are only human.

Our (almost) eight years were very intense, highly satisfying, and an experience I would not have missed for the world. It is a pleasure to see that under the present Editorial Team the Journal continues to flourish.

References