

Irish Journal of Medical Science: one year on

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It is one year since the new look journal hit the newsstands. How has the journal fared in the new century? In that first year, four issues of the journal have been published, together with 10 supplements containing 619 abstracts of Academy subsection and society meetings. In all, 40 original papers, 3 case reports, 16 book reviews, 7 literary or historical articles, 10 letters to the editor, 5 editorials, together with occasional reviews, commentaries, retrospectives, perspectives, short reports, lectures and guidelines have been published. The organisation of this workload owes everything to the administrative skills of the journal's assistant secretary, Helen Moore.

We would like to publish all papers submitted but for many reasons this is not possible. In the year to December 2000, 87 papers were submitted of which 35 were accepted for publication. Of the rest, 14 were rejected outright, 5 were resubmitted as a Letter to the Editor, 27 were invited to resubmit with no guarantee of publication and 6 are awaiting the referees' decision. Some papers are more appropriate for a more specialised journal. Some are rejected by the referees because of a weak hypothesis, inadequate data or unsupported conclusions. But many of these, thanks to the referees' constructive criticism, may be redeemed. And some are beyond redemption.

How are papers selected for publication? Each submitted paper is sent to two referees. If both advise acceptance it is accepted, subject to any changes indicated by the referees. If both advise rejection, it is rejected. If there is a split decision the paper, together with correspondences, is sent to a third referee. The refereeing judge determines the fate of the paper. Once the referees' report is submitted, a decision is made. Crossover copies of the report are sent to fellow referees to ensure transparency of judgement.

This peer review process may sometimes cause disquiet. I feel that our referees are our most valuable asset being the cornerstone of our quality. All who give so generously of their time and their advice provide an invaluable service to the journal but more importantly provide invaluable advice and encouragement to budding authors. Their criticism and comments must be seen in this light. Authors may, and do, question the referees' decision. In this case, the paper and reports are reviewed and a third outside referee is called on to adjudicate. In the event of severe criticism the correspondences are sent to the editor of an appropriate overseas journal and his or her advice is considered before responding.

Out of respect to our readers, many submitted articles are heavily sub-edited to aspire to a journal-standard English. It usually involves pruning lavish prose and directing wandering arguments. An inordinate amount of the sub-editing, however, involves correcting the referencing style in the text and in the reference list. While the example of previous issues is available

many choose to ignore it. This will inevitably lead to delay. In future, these inconsistencies will need to be corrected by the authors. To facilitate rapid processing, submitting authors should read and follow the guidelines for submission at the beginning of the volume. Failure to follow these is a frequent cause of delay and indeed of receiving an unfavourable report.

We encourage our referees to try and return their reports within three weeks. We realise that this is a terrible imposition on the busiest clinicians and researchers (only busy doctors undertake this work), but we feel that if not returned by this time our paper is in danger of being buried under a threatening tower of work. As a token of our esteem we publish all the names of the current panel of referees at the back of this issue.

We are trying to streamline the publication process. The most significant delays occur because of the refereeing process. We have, over time, identified those referees who for a variety of reasons cannot referee a paper within a reasonable time. These will be removed from our panel. The problem this poses researchers and trainees is that in some disciplines and in some streams of research the pool of available referees is so small, and some are busy, while others refuse to referee, leading to long delays to publication. So if you are a senior author of potential publications in the journal you must see why your support and your prompt return of your report is vital.

Commercially the journal has had a mixed first term. Once again the pharmaceutical companies have responded magnificently to a request for sponsorship. Each issue carried 11 full pages of advertisements. Without this sponsorship the new look journal would not have been possible. However, the new look came at a cost. The increased costs, many of which were under-budgeted, have proved difficult for societies and subsections of the academy. But quality costs. Societies and academy subsections are requested to build into their sponsorship budgets the cost of publication. As the journal gains nothing from these publications the cost must be borne entirely by the society or subsection. Judging by the number of curricula vitae that are built on publications in the *Irish Journal of Medical Science* the attraction of publishing meeting abstracts would suggest that submitting authors could be asked to include a surcharge if they wish to have the accepted abstract published.

The annual Doctors Awards were launched last November to a very positive response from the profession. All were agreed that it was a great success. The journal takes a slightly different view. As the awards were established to focus attention on the journal by being the main player, the title focused attention on Royal Academy of Medicine rather than the journal. This year the awards will run under the title the *Irish Journal of Medical Science* or JMS Awards. Many of the old categories will be retained. Amongst the new categories will be a Lifetime Achievement award, which no doubt will generate predictable controversy. Of greatest significance, the prize for best paper published in the *Irish Journal of Medical Science* is being increased to IRL4000. So get writing.

Finally, I have added a new assistant editor, Arnold DK Hill, to the staff. The requirement for the post? Somebody who will work harder for the journal than I can. Last year on this page I invited any reader who feels that he or she can contribute more than the present group of editorial advisors to contact me and he or she will be seriously considered. To date, there has been no response. The lines are still open.