

EDITORIAL

‘Directions to Contributors’

Every year at the meeting of the Editorial Board there is some discussion about the ‘Directions to Contributors’ that is published in the Journal. This discussion usually results in some suggestions for modifications or additions to the Directions which are incorporated in the next revision. All too often we receive papers in the Editorial Office where the authors have either not read or not understood the Directions, and this has a number of consequences for these particular papers; some papers may need to be returned to the authors where radical changes are necessary, but all of them involve both the Office or members of the Editorial Board in additional work, and this contributes to delays in the progress of the paper through the review and assessment process.

I am all too aware that many scientists adopt the principle ‘if all else fails read the instruction manual’ and I suspect that this also applies to ‘Directions to Contributors’, but at the same time I begin to wonder whether our Directions are not as clear as they might be. The Directions have evolved in a very piecemeal fashion with successive Editorial Boards adding, and occasionally removing, sentences or words. I wonder whether the time has come for a more radical review to make them, in current jargon, more ‘accessible’ to potential authors.

Recently I have been involved in a group concerned with the evaluation of data quality (for nutritional databases) and we have been trying to rationalize the way we look at data, and this has led me to look at the Directions in a different way.

It seems to me that there are four primary purposes that ‘Directions to Contributors’ to a journal have to serve: first, setting out the scientific areas for which the journal is prepared to accept papers, which is in effect a statement of the publishing policy of the journal; second, the scientific ethical standards that the journal expects from authors submitting papers; third, the scientific and technical conventions that authors are expected to follow in their papers; and finally, the style, both scientific and linguistic, that the journal uses.

The *British Journal of Nutrition’s* *raison d’être* is to publish original papers that advance the nutritional sciences, and therefore it expects all the papers submitted to it to develop nutritional concepts. This forms the first and crucial criterion for deciding whether or not a paper is acceptable. I recognize that this requirement may be extremely difficult for an author to judge. In part this is due to a fact of scientific life that most pieces of research ‘push back the frontiers of knowledge’ very gently and sometimes imperceptibly. These papers join the corpus of scientific knowledge that eventually grows by the accretion of information until at some point one can recognize that nutritional understanding has moved forward. The submission of a paper that really does change our understanding and develop new concepts is, of course, the Editor’s ideal but these are rare, especially in an experimental science such as nutrition, for in a formal sense only a theoretical paper can produce new concepts of a radical nature. An experimental paper can only show that previously held ideas or measurements are unsound and need to be discarded.

In this aspect of the ‘Directions to Contributors’ one cannot give precise directions since, by definition, an original paper or piece of research may be unlike any that has gone before it; the most radical advances may well come from a paper quite different from any that have been published before.

Nevertheless, any author submitting a paper to the Journal should be clear in their own mind where the paper assists in the development of new concepts. It is of great importance that this is also clearly evident in the paper itself. I recognize that original observations may

in themselves not specifically advance concepts, but I submit that the rationale for doing the work will include an element of the hypothesis that 'these observations are essential to the development of nutritional understanding'.

Some people, myself included, are reluctant to expound on the potential significance of their researches, expecting their peers to recognize the merits of their work. I hope that I can persuade these researchers to set their work in context for the benefit of the general readers of the Journal, which includes myself.

The second aspect of the directions concerns what I see as the scientific ethical requirements placed on authors submitting papers. Firstly we expect that the paper is an original piece of research and that it is not in the process of being submitted to another journal. The European Association of Scientific Editors is very concerned about the growth of multiple publication of the same, or essentially the same, piece of research and the Editorial Board of the *British Journal of Nutrition* shares this concern. At the very least it is important that the time that our editors and referees spend working on papers for the benefit of the science of nutrition is not being duplicated elsewhere. The growth of multiple publication is another symptom of the use of the numbers of scientific papers a worker has published in assessments of professional performance. I think, as scientists concerned for the integrity of scientific publication, we should press for quality rather than numbers of publications to be used in these assessments.

We also expect that all authors of a paper are agreeable to the paper being submitted and to the conditions laid down by the Journal. I know from bitter experience how difficult it is to get all collaborating authors to agree over every word, sentence or conclusion, but at the very least I expect that all authors of a paper are agreeable to it being submitted in the form that we receive.

Finally there are two more formal aspects of ethics that the Journal requires and which are seen by the present Editorial Board as being crucial for acceptance. These concern the need for formal ethical review of all work involving human subjects. This is an absolute requirement for publication, and in future we would like to see evidence of ethical approval submitted with the papers.

There is growing recognition that studies using experimental animals should also be submitted to ethical review, and we would like to encourage this trend amongst authors.

Submission of a paper imposes ethical obligations on the editors and referees of these papers, and we have the obligation to respect the authors' intellectual property contained in the paper and not to gain scientific advantage by having privileged advance knowledge of the work.

I will return to the other aspects of the 'Directions to Contributors' in a later Editorial because we are having discussions about some aspects of style in the near future and an account of these discussions may be of general interest.

In the meanwhile I would be pleased to hear from any author, potential or actual, about the clarity of our 'Directions to Contributors'.

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