

Fare thee well – the Editor's last words

GREG WILKINSON

This month I retire after 10 amusing years as editor of the *British Journal of Psychiatry*. I have not misused my office by writing many editorials during my tenure and I wanted to write this last one to take stock and to share some of my reflections on editing in general and on what, with my contemporaries, I have tried to accomplish. I became an Editor with the aim of improving scientific communication in psychiatry. My progress was developmental, and I received my journalological education at the hands of Edward Hare, John Crammer and Hugh Freeman (past editors of this *Journal*), and Michael Shepherd (past editor of *Psychological Medicine* and the doyen in this field).

I have relished the editorship of the *Journal*, in the youth of my career, and I am equally content to relinquish my red pen (Wilkinson, 1994, 2003a). I have assessed around 8000 articles. I have had the final say, even though the decision has often been made by others for me. My departing conclusion is that too much of minor significance achieves publication, in spite of our acceptance rate of only 20–25%. In short, I would agree with Henry Fielding: a newspaper consists of just the same number of words, whether there be any news in it or not. He might have added – provided there is advertising to support it.

I have embraced a progressive move towards more editorial openness and accountability, and I have tried to give the *Journal* momentum and an accessible, open-minded style. A diverse and vigorous group of critical younger psychiatrists has refreshed and challenged the Editorial Board. The delay in processing papers has been kept to a minimum, and the flow of papers from acceptance to publication has been consistent and efficient, with dates printed to avoid doubt. There has been a refurbishment of the *Journal* and the *Psychiatric Bulletin*, and the successful introduction of *Advances in Psychiatric*

Treatment, the electronic journal, and new columns (e.g. 'Highlights of this issue', 'Psychiatry in pictures', 'In debate', 'Ten books', 'Focus on psychiatry', 'Preliminary reports'). A marked increase in commissioned editorials, independent of or linked to articles of significance, has become an established feature. There have been changes to the structure of articles, some evident (three clinical implications and limitations, structured abstracts, declarations of interest) and others not immediately obvious to readers (reducing references and tables, and keeping authors to the point). I hastened the demise of the case report, to exclude what I see as psychiatric trivia. I published original research on my editorial decision-making (Howard & Wilkinson, 1998) and on the feasibility of open peer review (Walsh *et al*, 2000). Throughout, the Publications Department has delivered a substantial financial surplus for the benefit of the College.

In a parallel existence, I have been proud to contribute to the continuing growth and success of the *Psychiatric Bulletin: The Journal of Psychiatric Practice* (edited formerly by Alan Kerr and now by Tom Fahy), *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment: Journal of Continuing Professional Development* (edited by its founding editor, Andrew Sims, and now by Alan Lee), and an expanding book programme under the Gaskell imprint. Among the books, the College Seminars Series is an outstanding collaborative achievement, and the Books Beyond Words series (edited by Sheila Hollins) is a particular favourite.

ASK ME NO QUESTIONS, AND I'LL TELL YOU NO FIBS

There have traditionally been three main tensions regarding the Journal: being British v. international in outlook; balancing the 'biological' v. the 'clinical/service' content; and general adult psychiatry v. the sub-specialities. How have you managed to reconcile these opposing forces?

I would leave it to readers to judge but I have had to acknowledge that it is impossible to please everybody (even some of the time). Believe it or not, I once received a letter from a complainant suggesting that it is the *British Journal of Psychiatry* and the published articles should originate from Britain. I have adopted an international outlook and I have encouraged submissions from developing countries – indeed the *British Journal of Psychiatry* is one of the leaders in this regard (Wilkinson, 2003b). When I became editor there were concerns, particularly from psychotherapy and child psychiatry, about the lack of coverage of some sub-specialities. Now I receive criticism that I have not given adequate space to biological subjects. I think this whole biological/non-biological dichotomy is nonsense – subjective and false.

A favourite paper?

Any written by Robert Kendell or Robert Cawley.

Do you think that psychiatry and psychiatric research are any further forward?

Not much, if at all; and, in clinical settings, there has been a deterioration.

Are better papers submitted now?

I doubt it – judging from attending evidence-based journal clubs, when *Journal* papers are regularly found wanting.

What about appeals from disappointed authors – does this work?

Hardly ever – peer review is very far from perfect but I wouldn't encourage spurned authors to try again.

What makes you choose one paper over another that has similar reviews and ratings from the referees: writing style, length, title, subject matter?

All of the above; and, I ask myself, 'Will this be of interest to Dr X in routine clinical practice?'

How can young researchers increase their chances of getting their paper published?

By learning to write (columns, letters, editorials, reviews and articles) about topical subjects in an innovative style: and, after 3 years without success, they should take Mark Twain's advice and return to sawing wood.

Are there advances in psychiatry or, simply, research activities in psychiatry?

The latter. I would incline to the view that we are producing more answers than questions.

Should the editor be elected or selected?

It does not matter – provided the editor can be dismissed at any stage.

Would you say that 10 years is a suitable period of tenure?

Yes: you can make it, or otherwise, in that time.

Did you have editorial freedom?

My editorial decision-making was once usurped – by a former president – but it did not affect the scientific content of the *Journal*.

Have you made any mistakes?

A few. I have tried to correct my editorial mistakes when I have recognised them and/or they have been pointed out.

THERE'S A GOOD TIME COMING

I leave the *Journal* at an exciting time for medical publishing – electronic publication of print journals; competition with open-access online publishers (e.g. BioMed Central); the crucial importance in the UK of impact factors for the Research Assessment Exercise; the ethical dilemmas regarding declaration of interest, ghost-writing and industry sponsorship; and the changing nature of peer review. The most significant

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change in the past 10 years from my point of view has been the move to online publishing. This is more than just a change in the delivery mechanism, but strikes at the question of what journals are for, how they will be used in future and what sort of economic model will allow them to work. They allow searching, personalised alerts, instant access and rapid cross-linking, but what this might mean in the long term remains uncertain. At my last Editorial Board meeting the question arose as to which is the definitive version of the *Journal* – print or online? That requires resolution, which I readily bequeath to my fortunate successor Peter Tyrer.

ALL THINGS TEND TOWARD ONE FINAL END

I thank the Editorial Board, hundreds of remarkably generous unpaid peer reviewers, the Publications Management Board and my fellow College Officers, who have with quiet application enabled and enhanced the *Journal*. I am grateful to them all for their advice and support, invention and hard work. I am especially grateful to Alan Kerr, the Deputy Editor, David Jago, Head of Publications, Vanessa Cameron, Chief Executive, and Howard Croft, Editorial Adviser, for their wisdom and guidance before and after I became Editor. The excellent staff of the Publications Department

have played a crucial role in the editorial process, particularly Andrew Morris and Mary Leach, and in the past Sue Thakor, Zofia Ashmore and Judy Ashworth. I must also thank all those people who have submitted their work for consideration by the *British Journal of Psychiatry* over the decade of my tenure. I recognise that I have been privileged to be in my position and I am grateful to all those with whom I have been in correspondence for their (almost unanimous) patience, dignity and courtesy. The rest, I forgive. The University of Liverpool has generously supported my Editorship, albeit they have received scant compensation for their gift to the common good. Christine, Adam, Victoria, Dominic and Alexander Wilkinson have had a lot to put up with, and things are about to get worse.

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