

Entertaining eminence in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*

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The challenges for scientific journals at the beginning of 21st century are exciting but formidable. In addition to reporting faithfully new knowledge and new ideas, each journal, or at least all those aiming for a general readership, has to cater for a potentially huge lay readership waiting at the internet portals, a hungry press eager for juicy titbits, and core readers who, while impressed to some extent by weighty contributions to knowledge, are also looking for lighter material that is both informative and entertaining. In the past this type of content was frowned on as mere journalism, fluff of short-term appeal but no real substance. The lighter approach was pioneered by Michael O'Donnell as editor of *World Medicine* in the 1970s, who introduced a brand of racy articles, debates and controversial issues in a tone of amusing and irreverent iconoclasm. At this time it was dismissed as a comic by some of the learned journals but its popularity ensured that in subsequent years its critics quietly followed suit, as any current reader of the *British Medical Journal* and the *Lancet* will testify.

So how does the *British Journal of Psychiatry* reconcile these different demands? My view is that, whatever else appears between its covers, scholarship must not be compromised. The *Journal's* main priority must be the dissemination of new ideas and knowledge in mental science (two words that are somewhat out of fashion but remember this was the *Journal of Mental Science* between 1858 and 1963); this also must be the core of its future. At present the index of scientific excellence is the impact factor – the mean number of times the articles in a journal are cited in the two years after publication – which allows the current fetish of 'league tables for everything' to be given full expression. There is no doubt that the impact factor of a journal is a rough measure of its scientific importance, and the doubling of the impact factor from 1993 to 2001 (now 4.14) is testimony to the achievements of the last editor, Greg Wilkinson (Howard & Wilkinson, 1998). But the impact factor of a journal is not the only criterion of excellence (Seglen, 1997); any subject that creates interest and controversy is almost bound to be widely cited and some journals, such as the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, have excellent content and low citation rates. It is also an unfortunate fact that some of the most fundamental advances in knowledge are not realised at first and many years pass before their full impact is appreciated. Nevertheless, the *Journal's* impact factor is important and if Gregor Mendel had not chosen a minor journal in Brno for his epic publication, the dawn of genetics might well have been earlier.

How to satisfy the other demands effectively is not quite as easy. 'Comment is free but the facts are sacred', wrote the famous editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, C. P. Scott, and this became the watchword of his journalists. The problem in science nowadays is that there are almost too many facts. Statistical packages spew out facts in

abundance but do not always inform in the way that Scott intended. They need interpreting and, increasingly, it is informed and judicious comment that is getting closer to being sacred than the mere accumulation of facts.

Should this stop the *Journal* from becoming more readable? I hope not. I want people from all parts of mental health to wait in excited anticipation at the end of each month for their journal, in its reassuring bright yellow garb, to clunk through their letter boxes. And as psychiatrists meet in coffee and lunch breaks and before long management meetings I want to hear them saying, 'Have you seen the latest issue of the *BJP*? I always thought cannabis could lead to significant dependence and now we know' (Coffey *et al*, 2003); 'Isn't it good to see the revival of work on depersonalisation disorder – it's marvellous to know the subject is attracting real research at last' (Baker *et al*, 2003); 'What do you think of that ding-dong debate on the relationship between the drug industry and academic psychiatry?' (Healy & Thase, 2003). We want to aid this interest by promoting our eLetters facility for rapid publication of correspondence, now well under way on our website, and with the recent introduction of highlights, abstracts and contents lists from the *Journal* that can be downloaded to hand-held computers. I am also introducing, at the beginning of 2004, a new feature, 'From the Editor's desk', to go on the back page, in which topical and relevant subjects from all parts of psychiatry (and some from outside it which have import for us), will be presented. Contributions from readers will be warmly welcomed.

As the new Editor, I tread in the footsteps of an impressive list of predecessors. Since the *Journal* changed its name in 1963 I have known and gained from all of them. Eliot Slater helped me with my first publication (Tyrer, 1973); Edward Hare, who first invited me to join the Editorial Board in 1975, taught me that the true scholar needs terrier-like tenacity; John Crammer, with whom I worked both clinically and editorially, showed me that good journalism in an academic publication is not an oxymoron; Hugh Freeman demonstrated the importance of organisation and planning in developing the *Journal* and his legacy persists in the current excellent Editorial Board; and Greg Wilkinson, as his clinical role might suggest, has illustrated the importance of liaison with all

the key players in the global psychiatry movement in expanding and extending the *Journal's* influence. And, throughout most of this time, I have been constantly aware of the reassuring presence of Alan Kerr, our Deputy Editor, a modest but highly skilled mentor, whose contribution to the success of the *Journal* over the years deserves greater acknowledgement.

One of my learned editorial colleagues warned me before taking up this post – ‘a good editor has no friends’. I have come to reflect on the wisdom of this and should like to invite the readers of the *Journal* to let me know whenever I stray from necessary impartiality during my time as Editor. In particular, I do not want the subjects in which I am especially interested as a researcher – personality disorder and risk, classification and treatment of common mental disorders, trials of complex interventions and public mental health – to be unfairly represented in accepted publications. I also want to be equitable in accepting papers that yield negative as well as positive findings, and am constantly aware of the words of my son – a mathematician – who dismisses medical researchers as people ‘who are in a relentless search of a probability value of less than 0.05’. But I hope that in trying to be even-handed I can still be allowed to be passionate about the subjects that interest me and, as a practising clinician across much of psychiatry, I trust that my passion is shared by others. I also need to avoid another of

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my friends: overblown metaphors. The richness of the English language never ceases to impress me, but I must avoid bringing unnecessary verbiage into a publication that should be not only readable, but also immediately understandable, by all its readers.

So, in short, I would like the *Journal* to be both topical and learned, to have both immediate and long-term impact, to appeal equally to the busy clinician and the earnest researcher, and to be both serious and entertaining. Greg Wilkinson wrote at the beginning of his editorship that his aim was to make the *British Journal of Psychiatry* the leading international journal of general psychiatry (Wilkinson, 1994), and I hope that I, together with the *Journal's* staff and phalanx of editors, can continue on this quest. I invite all of you to aid me by giving both me and the editorial team feedback whenever the muse takes you, in the expectation that a genuinely joint enterprise will yield universal benefit.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

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