

## EDITORIAL

### Have you read the paper?

I suppose that to most research workers 'reading a paper' conjures up the presentation of a paper at a meeting. Most of the scientific audiences at such meetings actually cringe when authors do, in fact, read their papers. The Neonatal Society has, or used to have, a specific sentence in its constitution explicitly forbidding authors to read papers. I would like to focus on the reading of papers in a literal sense and especially that very demanding and difficult type of reading, proofreading, primarily because I think that some, and possibly the majority of, authors have only a vague idea of how critically important it is to the running of a scientific journal.

I was brought up in a Department where great attention was given to the initial preparation of a paper and where proofreading was taken very seriously indeed. I can well remember the sense of shame I felt when the proof corrections included changes that were not due to the typesetter but to me as an author, because I had not read the paper submitted as carefully as I clearly should have done. If you read the small print of most publishers' agreements you will see that they usually state that the authors' corrections will be charged to the author if they exceed, say, 10% of the original typesetting costs. One looks at this as an author with scant concern thinking that one is unlikely to want to make changes of that magnitude. I think if you saw the breakdown of our printing accounts you would think again, because the initial typesetting costs are relatively small whereas the costs of even small corrections are quite high. An example, not from this *Journal* but from my own personal file of 'mistakes one hopes will not be repeated', should suffice. The costs of small corrections on three pages of a 250 page document were 30% of the setting and printing costs. In *British Journal of Nutrition* accounts authors' corrections can sometimes cost the Society proportionately as much.

The reason for this is that initially typesetting is done at a very rapid pace and the printing of the proof involves preparation of camera-ready plates; corrections require more care and the repetition of the process. The fact that most printing work is carried out on computers expedites and reduces overall costs but, I suspect, has increased the costs of corrections. Quite clearly, proofreading is an essential stage in the production of any publication and one expects a certain proportion of typographical and other errors and these are costed into the operations; however, what we should strive to achieve is having a typescript that is what the author intends to appear in print.

Many authors are rather taken-aback when they see a copy-edited paper for the first time. Their beautiful manuscript prepared with such care appears to be covered with scribbled comments and marks. One feels rather like a schoolchild having work back from a teacher. True, some of the corrections are of the 'should have done better' or 'not so!' category, but most are specific marks for the printer. The state of a marked typescript coming from technical editors shows that a typescript which has been correctly marked can be dealt with by the typesetters without difficulty. One does not need a pristine typescript. Authors should take note that it is much better to change text by hand before the paper goes to the printer than after.

Careful reading, as if it were a proof, of the papers that authors submit has benefits for the author as well as saving costs of producing the *British Journal of Nutrition*. First, and

most important, it would save editorial reviewing time. Many papers as submitted contain sentences and often large sections of text whose meaning is unclear, requiring clarification from the author. Second, reading a paper aloud (the best way of proofreading) to someone unfamiliar with the text will often indicate where the construction of the language is convoluted. Sentences that are too long with many subordinate clauses become obvious when read aloud; the positioning of punctuation marks is also more clearly evident when the text is read in this way. Finally, I find that this discipline often makes me think about the logical flow of the arguments in a discussion. One of the more frequent editorial comments about a paper is that the discussion is too long and that the presentation of the arguments could be improved. We also find that making suggestions about revising a discussion is often difficult without rewriting the discussion for the author. I believe that more careful and critical reading of the discussion sections of papers would minimize this type of editorial comment and serve to contribute to reducing the interval between submission and acceptance.

The more critical reading of papers would, I suggest, improve the presentation of our science and bring real benefits for the publication process in terms of shortening review times and reducing the costs of publication.

D. A. T. SOUTHGATE