

A Look Back

It is a rare privilege to edit a major scientific journal. I am grateful to the Board of Directors of the Society for their offer to me. I still remember the day when David Valle called, on behalf of the Board, to ask whether I would be willing to consider the position. I liked the idea, was immensely flattered, and had no idea how I could do it. Looking back, I feel the same way.

But the point is that I didn't do it alone. This has been a team effort from the very beginning, even before the *Journal* moved from San Francisco. Roberta Wilkes was there at the outset, offering guidance and direction about what it would take to do it. She established the office before we made the transition and remained steadfast as the chief of operations (Managing Editor) during the entire tenure of the *Journal* in Seattle. In addition, she molded our group into a cohesive workforce that made the *Journal* run—coordinating intake, helping authors wend their ways through our complex requirements for publication, commiserating with them over rejections, facilitating appeals (some successful), and working to make things better. She was the point person in creating a cooperative and flourishing working environment with The University of Chicago Press (UCP), our publisher, and in working through the complexities of creating, with them, a unique on-line journal. For most of the first 4 years, Patty Baskin joined us in the office as the assistant and then associate managing editor. Patty's reserve, quiet fortitude, and implacability in the face of crisis provided us with the strength to deal with even the apparent worst of things as they appeared. Patty was an immeasurable part of the electronic conversion and provided the insights into how best to make the transitions. Her position was taken first by Nancy Grandjean and then by Suzanne Kelly during the past 2 years, both of whom contributed to the pleasure of working at the *Journal*. Charlie Epstein provided enormous encouragement and support, right from the beginning, and the difficult and tumultuous transition from San Francisco to Seattle could not have been made without the immense efforts and contributions of Shelley Diamond, the previous managing editor.

The *Journal* would not be what it is today without the efforts and contributions of John Ashkenas, an editor's dream come true. Judy Hall was the president of the Society and in her efforts to make the Society responsive asked me "What would you most like to help you at the *Journal*?" I wanted someone to share the tasks

of creating "added value" to the *Journal*—to identify, each month in the *Journal*, papers with some features that would appeal to our readers and to initiate a series on model systems and another on recent advances in human genetics—topics originally suggested in conversations with Rod McInnes when he was on the Editorial Board. Our short search came up with several excellent candidates, and we settled on John because of his writing flair, his broad knowledge and enthusiasm for science, and his ability to convey his excitement to others. John has been tireless in identifying topics, working with authors, creating the format for "Human Genetics '99" and for the model-systems papers, and writing insightful, pithy, and informative summaries of even the most arcane papers. John provided a sounding board for tough decisions about papers; a second, third, and fourth opinion in complex matters; someone to talk with about the scientific aspects of the *Journal*; and, basically, just someone to share the pleasures and frustrations of being an editor. It would take only a short conversation with any of the authors of the dozens of minireviews that he authorized, vetted, and edited to discover how he made things work better, how he brought new insights into problems in the authors' work, and how he created for them ways to communicate their thoughts and insights in ways that gave others the pleasure of finding them anew.

From its inception, the *Journal* has been published by UCP. UCP undertook with us a novel approach to electronic publication, which, we are excited to see, some other publications have followed. Instead of creating an electronic version of the *Journal* from the print version—the way most journals do—Evan Owens at UCP proposed creating a single "virtual" journal from which both the print and the electronic versions could be produced. The advantage of this approach was that we could publish, on-line, each paper as it was composed. This meant that, under ideal circumstances, we could publish a paper and enter it into the indexing systems, even though the *Journal* issue of the month was not complete, within 10–14 days or so of acceptance. The appeal of this approach was enormous and evident to everyone, so it took little effort to decide to take it. UCP has worked valiantly to achieve that kind of turnaround time, which it has for some manuscripts but not yet for all. A goal for the next year. Several others at UCP have been important in implementing these changes—Everett Conner has most recently taken up the banner, and Bob Shirrell continues as the head of the Journals Division.

We also are indebted to the UCP copyeditors, who maintain an extraordinary standard for our work.

The past 6 years have seen an explosion in human genetics. On our part, we have seen manuscript submissions climb by almost 300%. It has also been the time of new journals in human and medical genetics and a change in what constitutes publishable “units.” Our *Journal* continues to have high standards, to be even more highly cited, and to be at the top of the human genetics journals in that regard.

There remain several aspects of electronic publication that have not been resolved. It is extremely important that the schedule proposed from acceptance to on-line publication be achieved. It is a matter of confidence with our authors and with our readers. We have done our part, and UCP must come into line.

The next significant issue will be the decision about placing our papers in the common pool of publications, PubMed Central. This is the current iteration of a proposal born about a year ago in the guise of E-Biomed. The objective is to provide free access to the entire scientific literature through a single electronic site. As currently envisaged, all life-sciences journals would submit an electronic version of every article to the source—the National Library of Medicine—which would add links to the current literature, format the manuscript, create a PDF (the file from which you print the journal-like pages), and mount the product in PubMed or another archive. The full text of all articles would then be available to all comers, without charge.

A scientific society such as ours has a vested interest in providing access to the information published in the *Journal*, but it is not immediately clear that providing it through PubMed Central is economically feasible. Currently, all members of the Society and all people who have access to the *Journal* through library subscriptions have access to our electronic version, without additional costs. The Society charges just over \$500 per year for library subscriptions (the cost is this high because it is assumed that there is at each library an active readership that distributes the *Journal* to many dozens of readers). Currently it costs us almost \$1 million per year to publish the *Journal*, costs that come from both library subscriptions and an assessment of our members. These costs cover editorial office maintenance, copyediting, and typesetting, along with application of all the electronic links and creation of the electronic version, as well as the costs of printing and distributing the *Journal*.

Neither we nor anyone else currently has much idea of what would happen to library subscriptions if the *Journal* were available on line at no charge and with the guarantee of complete archiving. *The Journal of Clinical*

Investigation has been free on line for about 2 years. During that time the number of library subscriptions has fallen at a rate faster than had been the case prior to the change, but the analysis is complicated because a rate hike was instituted at the same time. If our library subscriptions fell to zero, to maintain and print the *Journal* we would have to institute page charges of \$140, which would put publication in the *Journal* out of reach of all but the best-funded laboratories—probably not our goal. Of course, if libraries stopped subscribing, the justification for indirect cost support to libraries would diminish and publication costs could be shifted to direct research support. Such a change would require a significant cultural change in the research establishment, something that has not yet occurred. Our break-even point is about 700 library subscriptions, the number at which we could continue to publish with our current page charge and not lose money.

The decision about whether to provide our copy to PubMed Central or simply to make our papers available to any interested reader immediately or with an embargo time will be one of the issues to be decided in the next several months. One alternative would be to provide the papers through our own site, mirrored through PubMed. This would allow us to determine the effect on library subscriptions. An embargo of 1–3 months would be another approach. It is not clear, however, why a separate site that duplicates many of our efforts to create the clean electronic version is warranted. A link to our site is easy.

Our new editor, Steve Warren, is an exceptionally able scientist and human geneticist—amply demonstrated by his selection as the Allen Award designee for 1999. Our transition has been extremely smooth, and Steve brings a number of fresh approaches to the *Journal*. He comes from a different scientific milieu and is the first nonclinician to edit the *Journal*. I think that both of these factors bode well for the *Journal*, and I expect that it will not be long before people will be saying that it is so much better, now that Steve is the editor. This is as it should be. This *Journal* covers the entire range of human genetics, and its content reflects in many ways the scientific background and interests of the editor. We can look forward to an interesting new mix of papers, to many that bring new and exciting findings to us in rapid fashion, and to an expanding sense of wonder and satisfaction at the unraveling of the human genome and its implications for human genetics. It will be an exciting time, and I look forward to seeing it through the eyes of the *Journal* under Steve’s direction.

PETER H. BYERS
Editor