

EDITORIAL

Editorial Bias

One of the reasonably common complaints that authors make about Editors is that they are biased towards certain types of papers and against others. For example, when I took over as Chairman of the Editorial Board of the *British Journal of Nutrition* several authors suggested that I might have a bias towards human nutrition papers and against animal work, especially that on large animals. I have expressed my thoughts on this notion on several occasions.

In the early years of the *BJN* it did sometimes appear to those working on the human side that the *BJN* seemed almost to be a house journal for the NIRD, a view which I am sure had as much foundation as the views noted in the first paragraph. However, many journals do attract particular types of papers and this is a self-reinforcing action because authors want to publish their papers in journals which are read by their peers who also publish in that journal. Some Editors have a feeling that they should encourage papers of a particular type, for example experimental studies, to give their journal a niche in the scientific literature, a strategy which could alter impact ratings if one chose the correct area in which to specialize. This is a high-risk strategy because one could end up driving away the authors of the next area to rise in the funding bodies' estimation and be left with a journal with a few new papers from a research area which people feel is worked-out, at least for the time being.

For a nutritional journal the potential problems of confining the choice of an acceptable area in which to specialize are accentuated by the very wide range of types of paper which quite truly do contribute to the advancement of the nutritional sciences. Nutrition, to use a cliché, is a very broad scientific 'church' and focusing on an area to the apparent, if not real, exclusion of others would I think upset, quite rightly in my view, the members of the Nutrition Society because one is, in effect, rating one area as more important than others in the scientific hierarchy. While employing Institutions may have worked this way, I do not see it as a sound editorial policy; it is certainly one which I find very uncomfortable because of my early experience in the Department of Experimental Medicine where any genuine new piece of scientific work was greeted with enthusiasm.

I have also had direct experience of working on a topic before it became fashionable and know how frustrating it is to have your most precious ideas dismissed as 'I do not think that this is an important topic; I suggest that you interest yourself in the current (buzz) area'.

One often hears that the typical response of a scientific editor to a new paper is 'the work is either not new or it is not true'. The essence of peer review is in fact to probe these two questions rigorously but positively. To this is coupled the question: does the paper present information which advances nutritional science either by presenting new findings or re-evaluating old ones? The question relating to whether the material is substantial enough for publication as a full paper is, of course, rather subjective and is made in relation to the scientific importance of the findings. Thus if the work breaks new ground in such an exciting fashion, a one-page paper would be accepted with editorial glee, possibly coupled with the thought: why has this been sent to us? As an Editor I am acutely aware that the process of peer review is, in many ways, subjective and different reviewers often judge the

significance and acceptability of a paper in different ways. In some cases I can see an element of bias creeping in, and the more perceptive members of the Editorial Board occasionally remark to me that their judgements might not be wholly objective. Editorial judgements have to be made in these cases and I do not think that any Editor who has the final decision over a 'marginal' paper finds the task easy. One tends to give the author a chance to justify the significance of the work; but in the final analysis some papers are rejected. The editorial nightmare, as I have said before, is to turn away the next Nobel prize paper, but the reverse, the publishing of a paper that is flawed, is in many ways I suppose even more worrying because it throws into doubt one's own scientific standards.

Recently I have experience from the author's side of another type of scientific bias and one which I find rather worrying. I know that some authors will think that it does an Editor good to have his paper rejected, however the paper concerned was a review of the evidence that a certain group of nutrients could be categorized in a particular way which was meaningful metabolically. Our paper reached certain conclusions which the reviewers thought were reasonably well-argued. However, the Editor felt that the conclusions reached were not acceptable in a nutritional journal because most nutritionists accepted that the categorization had nutritional validity. In other words our conclusions were not nutritionally politically correct and therefore the paper was regarded as unacceptable. I believe that in a scientific journal we have to accept the evidence as it is. I think that a paper must be judged on the scientific evidence it presents and I hope that we avoid rejecting a paper because the experimental evidence goes against our cherished positions. I know that this can be uncomfortable, especially if one's reputation hangs on the past work. However, this is the nature of scientific enquiry. One can only present what appears to be true in the light of the evidence before one. The passage of time may produce new evidence which shows that you were wrong. As Brutus said, 'Good reasons must, by force, give way to better'; as scientists we cannot avoid it.

D. A. T. SOUTHGATE