

EDITORIAL

Rate-Limiting Actions

In a previous Editorial on our attempts in the Editorial Office to tackle delays in publication due to our office procedures, I said that I would return to the rate-limiting steps in the progress of a paper from submission to publication where the responsibility lay mainly with the authors.

It goes without saying that one of the most important ways of avoiding delays in decisions and in final publication is the careful preparation of the paper. 'Directions to Contributors' do not stem from a desire of the Editorial Board to impose its ideas on how papers should be written, but to make sure that the published paper can be read unambiguously by the majority of the readers of the Journal. It is a 'style guide' that deals with the way studies should be described and analysed according to the concept that 'the work could be repeated by a competent reader'. This concept is rather idealistic and I doubt whether a request to repeat a study precisely would be highly rated by a funding body, and indeed some epidemiological studies can never be repeated, in the strict sense, because of the confounding effects of the passage of time.

Some of our requirements are technical and relate to editing needs; for example, double-spacing is essential to leave room for the technical editors to mark-up the paper, and the numbering of lines makes it so much easier to identify precisely a place in the paper where an editorial comment is being made.

I have mentioned before that authors need to look very carefully at their tables to see whether they are publishable; some tables submitted would never fit on the *British Journal of Nutrition* page format without reducing the size of the font used to one where a hand lens would be required to read it. We can deal with these issues technically but it uses up time unnecessarily since the author should be concerned about presentation as much as we are.

One aspect that gives us great concern, and in the case of one paper is producing profound delays in getting the paper published, is the description of experimental designs. Many authors have to use complex designs and these in addition to the demands placed on the statistical editors, many of whom like to re-work some of the statistics in a paper, present problems when they are described in the text. In the paper that is on my desk at the present time the design has proved very difficult to describe clearly in text because of the various sub-groupings and lengths of time on dietary treatments; in addition there are inconsistencies regarding the numbers of animals receiving each treatment. The use of a flow-diagram for the study would have eliminated this confusion and was suggested by the statistical editor at the first review, but the advice was not followed.

As a general point, I think that experimental designs can often be presented more clearly in a flow-sheet format.

The most common reason for delay arises when a revised paper is returned after attending to the points raised in the Editorial Report. I recognize that sometimes the reports are not as crystal-clear as one would like and I recognize that attention to the construction of the reports is one way where the editors and authors can interact to expedite publication. Many authors respond in detail to the report, identifying which points they accept as reasonable and those where the authors believe the editor to be mistaken. These

responses are very helpful indeed because, as I have remarked before, our editors do not regard themselves as infallible and authors have the final responsibility for what is published under their name. Other authors return a revised paper without comment, although they have accepted some points and not others. Sometimes crucial points for acceptance are disregarded without comment, initiating a second cycle back to the author.

It may be that on occasion authors cannot understand some points in the report; if this occurs it is best to query the report rather than press-on with a revision. The most difficult comment in an Editorial Report is when words such as 'the discussion could be reduced in length by say a third' are used, where we are asking the author to use an editorial pencil and prune, very drastically, the paper. Occasionally an editor marks the author's typescript with suggested sections for re-drafting but only exceptionally can the editor re-draft a large section of text. This is where the author needs the help of his or her colleagues who are usually prepared to be objectively critical with a paper in a way that authors find difficult.

I think that as a rule there are very few papers which would not be improved by judicious editing to shorten them.

D. A. T. SOUTHGATE