

GUEST EDITORIAL



Professor David Southgate was the seventh Honorary Editor of the *British Journal of Nutrition*, serving from 1989–1995 in that capacity, and for a total of 12 years on the Editorial Board. He retired as Head of the Nutrition, Diet and Health Department at the AFRC Institute of Food Research, Norwich, in August 1992. He has recently retired as Visiting Professor at the Universities of Salford and Newcastle upon Tyne, and as Honorary Visiting Fellow at the Department of Human Nutrition in the Agricultural University of Wageningen in The Netherlands.

Fifty years on

I am not sure if one can congratulate a Journal on achieving its 50th year of publication; 'seeing Abraham' as the Dutch refer to a man on reaching his 50th anniversary. I suppose one should congratulate the Nutrition Society on taking a brave step in starting a new journal in the late 1940s when the Society was relatively new and had to take a gamble on the science which had come of age in the war years and looked as though it could safely move away from its parents, Biochemistry and Physiology. Having been involved in the early years of another journal several years ago I know just how difficult it is to attract papers of the correct quality to encourage other authors to submit their work. It is a credit to the first Editor S. K. Kon and his Editorial Board that they set the *British Journal of Nutrition* on a successful path.

My first acquaintance with the *BJN* as a young researcher in the 1950s was rather an awesome one. The reputation of the Journal was rather forbidding: it insisted on pedantically correct English and its editors, especially the statistical ones, were rather terrifying. I recall seeing manuscripts from very senior authors in the Department of Experimental Medicine coming back from the Editor covered in red ink and the comments 'they really want to re-write the paper for us'. The choice of 'which' or 'that' was regarded as one of the deepest mysteries known only to the editors!

I soon found that the Editorial Board was not quite as fearsome as I first supposed and that the points raised usually led to improvements in the papers (as I hope they did when I was in the Chair). However, my impression was that the board had what I considered a fairly narrow view of the nutritional sciences and my first paper was grudgingly accepted because it was material to a proper 'nutritional study' by the other author.

I soon found that one could haggle with the editors over the extent of changes they felt necessary, although I was not always successful. I believe that having a paper rejected is an essential part of the training for working on the Editorial Board and especially as the Editor.

I served on the Editorial Board under two Editors, Geoffrey Taylor and George Pitt, and I think that they provided me with a very good grounding in making judgements about papers and interpreting referees' reports. These periods were spent while I was a bench scientist during those halcyon days before rigid project allocations and the continuing need either to prepare proposals or write progress and other reports, other than once every 5 years. Even then, like all Board members, it was a relief when the flow of pink folders ceased at the end of one's stint on the Board.

When George Pitt was retiring I was sounded-out informally as to whether I would consider taking over as Chairman of the Editorial Board. At that time I was awaiting cataract surgery and I had to decline. I was disappointed and thought that would be my one and only opportunity. However, late in 1989 Mike Gurr asked me again whether I would consider taking over, and after a little deliberation I agreed.

At that time the Editorial Office was at the NIRD in Reading and I have very pleasant memories of my early visits there while Margot Skipper and Roy Smith initiated me into the procedures of the Office and the task of being Editor. I have vivid memories of going to a pile of folders 'awaiting decision' and starting to read the first paper. 'You have not got time for that' piped up Margot 'just read and sign the letters'. I had earlier discovered, after agreeing to take over the Editor's job, that the Society had purchased its own office and we had to plan to move the Editorial Office into London. This meant that, unlike all previous Editors, I would not have the Editorial Office close to me and systems would have to evolve pretty quickly to deal with this change. This meant that the role of the so-called 'Editorial Assistant' would need to be upgraded so that much of the day-to-day editorial decisions would devolve on the person we chose to take over from Margot. Mike and I interviewed several candidates but unfortunately for my peace of mind, but fortuitously as it turned out for the Journal, we were initially unsuccessful and I approached Ian Sambrook to see if he would take the job. Margot advised me that a scientist rather than someone with editorial experience was the best choice, and so it has turned out.

Ian and I looked at the pathways which a paper had to traverse before appearing in the Journal and found that there seemed to be many futile cycles and we set-to trying to eliminate them and achieve a more logical and speedier flow through the system. This was one of our overriding aims while I was Editor and we did have some success.

Just when I felt that I understood how the Journal worked I had a letter from Michael Isaacs, the Society's Accountant, telling me that the publication costs were eating into the Nutrition Society's profits and that this was primarily due to us publishing more papers and pages than we had estimated to the publisher. I read through the responsibilities of the Chairman of the Editorial Board and found to my dismay that I was responsible for the financial propriety of the publications as well. So we began a process of sticking within our page estimates which is why the first year of my Editorship was marked by some very slim numbers. Perusal of the accounts suggested that we might be able to cut costs and in negotiations with Cambridge University Press, led by Mr Isaacs, we began to restore the profits from the publications which are essential for the future activities of the Society.

My memories of my 5 years as Editor are of regularly receiving large boxes of papers, rather too regularly for my wife and our social life, especially during the years when I was still running the Department at the IFR. I found that I was unable to stick to the advice from Margot; I found it impossible not to try to read the papers. I thought that life would get a

little easier when I retired but the editorial work seemed to expand to fill the time available. Some of this was our own doing (Ian and myself) in that it seemed a good move to monthly publication as this gave greater flexibility in the office and also meant that a new *BJN* was on the library shelves more frequently. It also speeded up publication considerably and gave us more scope to include notices of meetings and more immediacy in dealing with letters to the Editor. The monthly publication had its most obvious effect on my Editorials because their frequency increased and I was very thankful not to be the editor of a daily paper. Then unfortunately the need for further eye surgery arose and I decided that I should give up the Editorship in a planned fashion rather than have it thrust upon me. We were fortunate to find that Keith Frayn was not averse to taking over. I gave up the Editorship in the summer of 1995 and although I dealt with 4 papers which I had started on their path to publication, I soon began to settle down to a life without the endless stream of papers. My first impression was not one of relief but surprise at how much time I had and the fact that I now had some measure of choice of what I did without the nagging feeling that there was a box of files waiting my attention. I must say that this choice is still rather difficult to accept but I suppose that it is a reflection of retirement in the formal sense.

I left the *BJN* as a critical stage was being reached in its future and I am very pleased to see that the changes are now in place and seem to be moving in the right direction.

The next 50 years will involve, I suspect, radical changes in scientific publications and some of the issues which were beginning to affect the Journal when I was Editor will become more demanding. The freedom of communication that the Internet provides will be very attractive for those to whom the time-consuming process of peer-review and preparation for conventional publication were seen as unwelcome constraints. I was often concerned about the restricted readership that many scientific papers achieved and which their authors seemed to accept, and whether in strict terms publishing say 2000 copies of a journal in which some and possibly most of the individual papers might be read by say 200 workers in their field was not an efficient use of resources. However, rapid electronic dissemination of non-peer-reviewed papers could prove disastrous for nutrition research. In my time as Editor about ten papers only were published in the form submitted by their authors and most of the papers were published only after considerable editorial input and attention to points raised by referees. Coupled with this, about one third of all papers were rejected (and this is I suspect about the norm for most journals). Some of these papers were, moreover, fatally flawed in their design. This means that peer-review is essential for the health of scientific publication as a whole. However, I am not saying that our present peer-review system is ideal nor I suspect it is always truly objective. Some journals are trying to examine the process in an attempt to make it more objective and transparent and I am sure that all researchers will welcome these approaches. Dealing with copyright matters when electronic publication becomes the norm is also something which I am certain that future Editors and publishers will need to address pretty quickly.

All this implies is that the future of all scientific publications is changing and I am sure that the *British Journal of Nutrition*, as it embarks on the next 50 years, will have to adapt to and exploit these changes for the benefit of the Nutrition Society and the Nutritional Sciences.

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