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Editorial

Abstracts—false science

Authors who present papers at scientific meetings enjoy having the abstract published and seeing their name in print. It adds status to the communication and some authors include abstracts as publications on their curriculum vitae. Several long established societies have been able to secure a regular place for their abstracts in reputable scientific journals but the multiplication of new societies has meant that most journals are unable, or unwilling, to publish society abstracts; the result has been for abstracts to be published as separate books, or in the case of the 1983 Paediatric World Congress, as a 1000 page, three volume book, costing $50.

We do not publish abstracts (apart from a few, selected for historical interest, from the annual meeting of the British Paediatric Association) partly because we have had personal experience of preparing abstracts for meetings and recognise their limitations. All too often the abstract is written several months before the meeting, when the subject of the work is no more than an idea in the author’s mind or, at best, the final results have not been analysed. These abstracts tend to be a vague and inaccurate description of the results the author is hoping for. At an international paediatric organ specialty meeting last year, study of 7 consecutive spoken presentations showed that the results presented differed from those published (as abstracts printed in a reputable European paediatric journal), in all but one of the 7. In the other 6 there were major discrepancies which made the published abstracts false. For the massive international meetings the position is even more chaotic. At the 17th International Congress of Paediatrics there was one free paper session in which only two of the 7 presentations listed were given, because the speakers did not turn up. Yet all 7 presentations appear in printed form in the official proceedings of that congress. Whether the work which was not presented was ever anything more than an idea in the authors’ mind we shall never know.

A few scientific societies control and check the authenticity and value of published abstracts, but in clinical medicine such quality control is rare. Those clinical societies that attempt to exercise quality control by asking their members to vote on the suitability of the presentation for publication as an abstract tend to create merely embarrassment.

It can be useful to look through abstracts to see what workers in other parts of the world are doing. But unfortunately there is an increasing tendency for the information contained within published abstracts to be quoted as reliable information and for the reference for the abstract to be given at the end of the scientific articles. It has become increasingly apparent to us that many abstracts report work that has never been presented, which may not have been done, and which if it was done produced a different result. Because of that the editorial board has decided that it will no longer allow abstracts to be cited as reference for information contained within articles published in our journal. We are not prepared to deal in dud currency.

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