For wrapping the fish and chips?

S P LOCK

Several of the shafts in Richard Asher’s ‘Why are medical journals so dull?’ were aimed at the *BMJ* (as he told me when I was his houseman). Some, however, would have been just as appropriate to other targets; would these have included the first volume of the *Archives*? Certainly some of the externals are the very features that Asher stigmatised: drab cover, poor quality paper, unattractive titles, and overlong articles. Other contributors deal with the scientific quality of these; here I shall consider one aspect that Asher didn’t touch on—the subediting—and one that he did—the style of writing.

**Subediting**

Another major enfant terrible of our time, Sir Peter Medawar, evoked a lot of applause when he called the scientific paper a fraud: science doesn’t happen with the cosiness of the IMRAD structure (introduction, material and methods, results, and discussion), and so articles should be written to reflect reality. This idea is fine when authors of Medawar’s or Asher’s calibre are writing, but most of the articles I have seen written in this fashion have all the likely clarity of Freud’s first consultation with the Wolf Man. And it is impossible for the eavesreader to find out quickly at what pH the experiment was conducted or what the author thinks the message is (and not infrequently he leaves this out anyway). For most of us the IMRAD structure is a useful prop, particularly when each section of the article does no more and no less than is demanded of it, and Bradford Hill’s series of questions is still the best guide for the tyro: ‘Why did you start, what did you do, what answer did you get, and what does it mean anyway? That is a logical answer for a scientific paper.’

The need for formality is well illustrated by volume 1 of the *Archives*. Some articles have summaries; others do not; others do not have subheadings at all, while any thought that there might be some consistent hierarchy or meaning to the sequence, size, or position of these where they
are provided is soon dashed by finding that one article uses capitals, another italics, yet another both, and in either a central or shoulder position, or both. (The only regular feature is the old fashioned full point at the end of the title of the article, a subheading, or a table.) Finally, faced with the references, the obsessional gives up, blessing for once the Vancouver convention: what we now know universally as JAMA has no fewer than six different abbreviations,* two versions being seen in a single short reference list.

All this suggests, I believe, that if the articles were altered at all this was done bby the printers, who would routinely have ‘marked them up’ for the press (a supposition confirmed by comparing the amateurish charts—presumably drawn by the authors—with the clear photomicrographs, some of them in passable colour). Illegally, the bound volume does not contain the names of the printers—but could they have been the BMA’s own, dealing mainly with the BMJ, whose flat bed machines occupied the whole of the fourth floor of BMA House until 1935?†

The two editors had a small editorial board. Their prestigious names were no doubt there to give the journal a cachet; certainly, none of them is likely to have been concerned with subeditorship, although the occasional obsessional, such as the great Robert Muir, editor of J Path Bact, stands out by an insistence on meticulous preparation of manuscripts, often done around his own dining table.

The Archives board is also unlikely to have been concerned with peer review, let alone mundane matters; though review goes back to the beginning of serious scientific publishing, it was not all that widely practised in the 1920s, coming into routine use some 20 years later.4 (Even in the 1960s the editor of Nature was said to choose most articles for publication by assessment within the office, taking the occasional difficult manuscript with him when he lunches at the Athenaem in the hope that he would meet a colleague who could give him an expert opinion on it. (Maddox. Personal communication.))

*Jnl Am Med Assn Chic; Jour Amer Med Assc Chic; Jour Amer Med Assoc; Jnl Am Med Assoc Chicago; Jour Am Med Assn Chicago; J A m Med Assoc Chicago. Concern over accurate references is not a mindless obsession: I would challenge anybody to retrieve some of those in this first volume, such is the paucity of information they give (no authors initials, or titles of the articles, for instance).

†One of the offices at the journal, the first I occupied, has a corner cupboard made out of the old lift shaft that carried the heavy lead type from the basement to the press.
transfusion or tuberculosis cannot. Much was produced around 1926 that has the same impact today: Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*, Aldous Huxley's *Point Counterpoint*, Henry Moore's first reclining figures. Better to revel in them and to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the *Archives* with the current issues, though in 2046 much the same will be said about these—and that is how it should be if medicine, and paediatrics, is to continue to advance.

References


(Stephen Lock is editor of the *British Medical Journal* and has been a member of the editorial committee of the *Archives* since 1975.)

Sir Thomas Barlow, who wrote the introduction to the 1926 *Archives* (see pages 933–8 of this issue), was one of Jenner’s assistants at University College Hospital, London, where he had qualified in 1871. Three years later he was a Registrar at The Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street, and within two years he was Assistant Physician at that Hospital and the Charing Cross Hospital. He occupied the Holme Chair of Clinical Medicine at University College Hospital from 1895 to 1907.

In 1883 he showed that infantile scurvy was identical with adult scurvy and that rickets was a separate disease, which became known as ‘Barlow's disease’. He was Physician-Extraordinary to Queen Victoria, King Edward VII, and King George V. Barlow was President of the Royal College of Physicians during the controversy over the National Insurance Act. He had long been Senior Fellow on the College List when he died in his hundredth year.