



## From the Literature ... Whizz Bang into the Electronic Age

by Liz Wager

Journal editors are (some would say, at last,) thinking seriously about electronic communications and, as websites proliferate, there has been a flurry of articles and even whole issues devoted to the topic. *The Lancet* provided a useful introduction for the cyber-novice with its 'Guide to the Internet' which appeared as a supplement to volume 351 (1998). It includes a short paper on the electronic future of scientific articles, a longer discussion of peer review on the internet, and tips about useful medical websites. The *BMJ* has gone a step beyond discussing electronic peer review and tried to use this method for a paper on its website ([www.bmj.com](http://www.bmj.com)). The responses make entertaining reading but this is a rather tentative experiment, since the paper in question does not present findings from a clinical trial, but is, itself, about the electronic future of journals. So, this electronic trial, while fun and full of polemic, does not answer the question of whether electronic peer review of regular papers will be feasible. However, it does illustrate the difficulties of commenting impartially about the quality of a piece of work (which is what one hopes reviewers will do) since most of the responses dive right in with their opinions about the views expressed in the paper rather than the quality of the work. Rapid electronic response seems to disinhibit the writer – maybe it still feels more like play than work – and it will be interesting to see if this aspect jeopardises serious electronic review of primary research papers.

Moving off the subject of electronic communication for a while, the *BMJ* has also looked at the question of whether the identity of reviewers should be revealed to authors. The issue of 02 January 1999 (vol 318, no 7175)

contains a randomised trial comparing open versus anonymous review (p.23-27) and an editorial on the subject (p.4). The trial found no difference in the quality of the reviews and the *BMJ* has therefore decided to adopt a policy of open review and will probably list the reviewers at the end of articles ... should be interesting!

Back to the world of cyberspace, *JAMA* devoted a whole issue to computers in medicine (21 October 1998, vol 280, no 15). This contains articles on e-mail consultations, computerised drug alert systems, computer-based decision support systems, and building your own website. Although this issue contains lots of useful reference material it can be a bit heavy going – I made the mistake of taking it on a longish flight and was thoroughly bored by computer jargon at the end of it, but I'd have probably appreciated the individual entries if I hadn't tried to read it from cover-to-cover.

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Back on this side of the pond, the *BMJ* produced an equally technical mini-series on quality management of medical information on the internet (28 November 1998, vol 317, no 7171, p1496-1502). However, this has the advantage over *JAMA* that you can pretend to be reading it while gawping over the tastefully erotic pictures which accompany another series on sexual health. I tried to read this one on a train journey and gave myself a crick in the neck trying to ensure that my fellow passengers couldn't read it over my shoulder!

Until computers become as convenient as paper journals for reading on the hoof, I think paper will remain a handy format and reports of the death of paper journals are premature. However, the net is opening up some interesting possibilities which will affect all of us involved with medical communication so keep watching the screen and happy surfing!

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***E-mail address is corrected from last issue!!!!!!***

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