

## **From the Literature ... a Tale of Old Boys, Journalology and Skulduggery**

**By Liz Wager**

When your husband complains that you read the *BMJ* in bed it is a sure sign that medical writing has taken over your life. If you not only read scientific papers but search out articles about the journals themselves you are in an advanced stage of journalitis and cure is probably impossible. I offer this column for fellow sufferers and anybody who has to deal with the medical literature. As you will see, my main interest is peer-review and issues surrounding the publication of clinical trials. If any readers suffer from the regulatory form of journalitis and would find it therapeutic to report their findings, I'd be happy to share my column space.

There has recently been a bumper crop of articles for those interested in 'journalology' and the ethics of medical publishing. Whole issues of *JAMA* and the *BMJ* are devoted to the peer review process and conflict of interest respectively (*JAMA* July 15th, **280**, No 3 and *BMJ* August 1st, **317**: 291-358). *JAMA* covers a range of papers presented at the Peer Review Congress which took place in Prague last year while the *BMJ* concentrates on research sponsorship by tobacco, alcohol and baby milk companies. For those of us working in the pharmaceutical industry it may come as a relief to discover that other industries are even more reviled by journal editors but, on a serious note, it might have been interesting to have seen a discussion about the more everyday problems of conflicting interest which arise when money changes hands between companies and doctors.

### ***The thorny issue of authorship***

Even more recently, *The Lancet* (Sept 12th, **352**: 892-9) features a series of short articles about the thorny issue of authorship in which eminent journal editors argue over whether the current guidelines (from the so-called Vancouver group) are useless or simply not enforced sufficiently. Anyone who has to negotiate authorship with colleagues or investigators should watch this debate as there are signs that many journals will change their policies soon. The *BMJ* and

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*Lancet* are already experimenting with lists of who did what and the concept of the contributor may soon replace our existing ideas of what constitutes an author. For an idea of what many journal editors have in mind you should look at Rennie *et al's* prophetic piece on 'When authorship fails' in *JAMA* **278**: 579-585 (Aug 20th, 1997). I welcome the move towards contributors as I find the Vancouver authorship guidelines don't work with multicentre, company-organised research and have often felt that scientists in the industry get a raw deal. If we, as professional scientists or professional writers, want others to respect our work and recognise the high quality of research performed by the pharmaceutical industry, I believe that the first step is recognition of who does what. The old system of authorship propped up the cosy, but inaccurate, view that the main intellectual contribution in company-sponsored clinical trials comes from external investigators. Companies were happy to support this myth in the

## ***The Write Stuff***

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### ***From the Literature***

mistaken belief that it made their publications appear more objective and less biased (despite the fact that most readers can spot an industry-sponsored study at a hundred paces and funding was acknowledged in the small print). Strict enforcement of the Vancouver guidelines also meant that many people involved in data collection, trial monitoring, data analysis and medical writing never got acknowledged. If the role of professional writers is acknowledged, accusations of 'ghost writing' will disappear (for my views on this see elsewhere in this issue). I am taking part in an authorship task force for the Council of Biology Editors and would love to hear from any EMWA members with strong views on this topic, or anybody with anecdotes about problems with the Vancouver guidelines or suggested solutions.

#### ***Research fraud and other dirty dealings***

Another hot topic is research fraud, and this is the focus for a recent edition of the *BMJ* (June 6th, **316**:1726-33). The perspective is very UK-centric but there are commentaries from the US and Denmark. I was disappointed that the emphasis was on setting standards in academia, as though nobody had thought of the problem before, and there is virtually no mention of the pharmaceutical industry's long-standing and well-tested mechanisms for detecting and preventing fraud.

If you relish alleged skulduggery by the industry you might be interested by claims in the *BMJ* that Bristol-Myers Squibb Canada tried to prevent publication of a report (*BMJ* **317**: 618). The same journal also reports a dispute between Apotex and a hospital investigator over the right to publish controversial findings (**317**: 618). While it is always uncomfortable to see the industry's reputation besmirched, these cases are a sobering reminder of the importance of ethical contracts with investigators. If you are involved with, or concerned about, pharmaceutical companies' marketing activities then a report by Health Action International called '*Blurring the Boundaries: new trends in drug promotion*' makes thought-provoking reading but the tone is rather inflammatory. This group clearly enjoys knocking the industry but some of their points are, nevertheless, worth considering.

#### ***Exclusive proof that journal editors are a bunch of old amateurs!***

If you have ever received a high-handed rejection from an omnipotent editor, you must surely have indulged in some speculation about their qualification for the jobs. *JAMA* July 15th **280**: 286-7 spills some of the secrets including the fact that most editors simply learn on the job and receive no formal training. A staggering 96% of the editors were male, 69% were 50-69 and 10% were over 69 so it appears that the 'old boy network' is very much at work here. Papers from present and former editors of the *British Journal of Psychiatry* (**173**: 110-115) provide more detail about the peer-review process and, in particular, what editors do when reviewers disagree.

Next issue I plan to review recent papers on electronic publication and anything else which catches my eye. If you spot something interesting, do let me know (my e-mail is lwager@jacgb.jnj.com).