Letters

Needless Pains Caused by Heedless Editors

Among the policies and practices of editors of scientific publications are two trivial ones that have the singular quality of being able to cause maximum pain to authors with a minimum of effort by editors. These are (i) the passing on to authors of sanctimonious, snide, and picayunish alterations and criticisms made by referees and (ii) frequent changes in the format of bibliographies.

I suppose no one questions the need for referee editors, although it is a question whether they should remain anonymous or not. Most of us object when referee editors use their office as a means of venting their bad humor and aggressiveness on a hapless author. I have seen many, many letters which have been passed on to authors that are little more than scurrilous personal diatribes, thinly veiled as scientific criticism. When an editor receives such criticisms from a referee, he should extract the scientifically valid comments, clean them up, and consign the rest to the wastebasket. The habit of sending the author an unedited carbon copy of the referee's remarks is deplorable. It is traumatic enough for authors to receive rejection slips, and heaven knows many of them should, but there is no need to be brutal.

On the other hand, an author should be deeply grateful for the time and effort some referees give to trying to improve his manuscripts. It is a time-consuming and exacting job, for which the referee should either be thanked or paid. I favor paying him. Refereeing could quite as reasonably be put down as a publication expense as, say, copy editing.

My second class of trivial practices is that of the small, pesky, arbitrary changes in bibliographic format demanded by different journals and by the same journals at different times. Bibliographic citation has been made chaotic by the practices of various journals. The time lost by authors on such trivia can be enormous, yet, I suppose, few editors think much about it and thus may be likened to authors who waste the time of conscientious editors by carelessness and slovenliness.

Bibliographic reference is important in manuscript construction, because proper citation not only gives readers vital information and keeps continuity in the body of knowledge but also tends to keep authors honest. But the modern trend in some journals, ostensibly to save space, is to reduce references to a number arrived at by some wholly arbitrary guess, or "from experience." The saving is so trivial that this argument can be easily dismissed. Then there is the directive that all references must have inclusive pagination, which means that many of us who have collected references and abstracts for many years must again spend time in the library to obtain the number of the last page. The reasons given for this change are either trivial—for instance, that it provides another check on accuracy—or frivolous—that it tells the reader whether the article cited is long or short. I am not sure whether the short or the long article is the desirable one to read. Under any circumstances, to make the change is very time consuming. Until a year or two ago, this was not a usual or standard kind of reference.

Then comes another directive, that authors' names in the list of references be alphabetized. Anyone who has ever written a paper using this system knows what trouble really is. Forget one reference beginning with A and the entire bibliography and all the reference numbers in the text must be changed. In practice, one usually tries to find a way of leaving the references out rather than going to all this trouble. And may I ask of what use it is anyway? The only one I have found is to be able quickly to determine whether an author has referred to any of my papers. If he hasn't, the paper is obviously suspect!

The crowning blow in the category of editorial trivia is the use of *et al.*, to which McCubbin and I have referred [*Circulation Res.* **3**, 547 (1955)]. Very recently Carl Dragstedt has inquired [*Arch. Surg.* **88**, 905 (1964)] whether the world should cite the writers of musicals as "Rodgers *et al.*" instead of "Rodgers and Hammerstein." Use of *et al.* guarantees that the authors first in line are the only ones to be recognized; the rest could well remain in that great and anonymous group called *et al.* for the rest of their lives.

Millions of man hours could be saved by the adoption of a uniform, simple system of bibliographic reference used by all scientific journals in the world. A start in that direction has been made in the *Style Manual for Biological Journals* (American Institute of Biological Sciences, Washington, D.C., 1964). We are all in the debt of the committee that prepared this almost flawless manual (it is unfortunate that it recommends inclusive pagination).

The present capricious systems are a constant drain on one of our most valuable commodities, time, and a great strain on investigators' dispositions. This is needless and, I fear, heedless as well. We can all do better.

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Desalination Research in California

In the editorial "Desalination of water" (18 Dec. 1964, p. 1533), the author attributes to the Office of Saline Water of the Department of the Interior sponsorship of the development of a reverse-osmosis desalination process giving promising results. This development was only partially sponsored by that agency. Chronologically, the facts are these:

In 1957, Reid and Breton, at the University of Florida and under the sponsorship of the Office of Saline Water, disclosed that cellulose acetate is semipermeable to sea water salts (*1*). However, their membranes, made by standard casting methods, gave such low fluxes of desalinized water as to be uneconomical, and were too thin to be readily handled.

In 1960, Loeb and Sourirajan, at the University of California, Los Angeles, announced a technique for fabricating relatively thick (0.01 cm) cellulose acetate desalination membranes in such a way as to have the