

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Authorship

I congratulate *CBE Views* on laying the foundations for a thorough debate on the issue of authorship. There is no consensus in the various contributions of editors, authors, and others involved in scientific publication, as outlined in your columns.

There is a misunderstanding and an error in the article by Dr Edward Huth ("Authorship Standards: Progress in Slow Motion", *CBE Views* 1997;20(4):127-31). The meeting on authorship which took place in Nottingham in 1996 did not arise from observations by myself and colleagues that many researchers do not know about the ICMJE Guidelines. Rather, the research was done to provide such information for discussion at the meeting. In other words, the meeting stimulated the research, rather than the research stimulating the meeting, as implied in the article. In her report of the meeting (*BMJ* 1996;312:1501-1502) Fiona Godlee wrongly stated that the survey took place in one university department. This error has been, unfortunately but understandably, repeated in Dr Huth's article. The survey took place in one medical school and involved 17 university departments. Full details of this survey have now been published in the *BMJ*.

Having spent 10 months (1996-1997) on sabbatical in the United States, I had the opportunity to discuss the issue of authorship with students and academic colleagues in 3 universities. These discussions did not offer me confidence that Dr Huth's view that the ICMJE criteria have gained highly visible acceptance is correct. I found the standards for authorship to be loose and a matter for ill-feeling, confusion, and contention. I would urge researchers in the United States to undertake empirical research before closing the debate on authorship.

**Raj Bhopal**

Department of Epidemiology  
and Public Health  
School of Health Sciences  
University of Newcastle  
Newcastle upon Tyne  
United Kingdom

*Reply:* What is important in issues of authorship standards is that institutions and academic authors establish their own standards. It is authors who have most at stake in standards for authorship, not editors. If the coin of authorship is debased, it is the academic world that will pay the price.

**Edward Huth**

Editor Emeritus  
*Annals of Internal Medicine*  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

### Number Style

I'd like to respond to your request for opinions on the use of the *SSF (Scientific Style and Format)* style for numerals in *CBE Views*. I agree with Judith Linn that the use of arabic numerals for nonquantitative number words is extremely distracting. . . . I, too, am jarred by the use of "1st person" instead of "first person" or "on the 1 hand" vs "on the one hand." I vote for a deviation from the *SSF* style in these instances.

However, I would also like to express my delight with the March-April issue of *CBE Views*. I found the articles on managing editors and organization of editorial offices especially revealing and informative. Even though ours is a small department (other than three technical editors, I'm it!), I plan to incorporate many of the management concepts into our procedures. Hopefully, a Short Course for Managing Editors will become a reality in the near future. Thanks again for an enlightening issue!

**Mary Ann Schmidt**

Managing Editor  
Carnegie Museum of Natural History  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Judith Linn's letter in the Vol. 20, Nr 2 issue of *CBE Views* has spurred me to express non-scientific quantities. With each issue of *CBE Views* I am mentally brought up short at the first such use, and I find myself paying more attention thereafter to whether other such numerals will appear than to the actual ideas in the text. I therefore cast my vote for dropping the use of numerals to express non-scientific quantities!

Other than the distraction caused by this style matter, what a great journal! Thanks for your efforts!

**Diana Bosse Mathis**

Professional Communications Consultant  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

The 1 reason 2 admire an editor is that he or she is not 1 2 slavishly follow arbitrary rules but gives at 10tion to usage that allows 4 clear, uncomplie8ed sentence structure.

**William S Haubrich**

Senior Consultant Emeritus  
The Scripps Clinic & Research Foundation  
Clinical Professor of Medicine  
University of California, San Diego

*Editor's note: Look in the next issue for an update on the recommended number style from the Scientific Style and Format Subcommittee and on CBE Views style.*

### Managing Editors

I read with interest your recent focus on managing editors (March/April 1997). I hoped that *CBE* would do its part to explain the mysteries of this most important position to those who are not in it. But I was disappointed with several aspects of the feature.

How can Marilyn Yurk suggest that typing ability should be a requirement for a managing editor? The managing editor is responsible for all aspects of making the journal run smoothly. If typing ability is a help, that should be the managing editor's own decision. Ms Yurk's attitude is unfortunately typical of the plague of micromanagement that is visited on many managing editors, but that she herself adopts this thinking is especially distressing.

For similar reasons, I question the emphasis on database expertise as the most important qualification for a managing editor. Again, a good managing editor can be trusted to do the job the best way she sees fit. The full impact of the irony that the database requirement would have kept Ms Y out of her current position should not be lost. I hate to think of today's promising editors languishing in computer school.

Thus, the feature unfortunately reinforced the pernicious misconception that the managing editor is basically a secretary to the editor-in-chief. The above-mentioned sins of commission are really symptoms of a more important omission. The article did not even mention the fact that the managing editor must be an authority for the editorial matters of the journal, but doesn't this qualification matter the most? In my experience, you can learn what you need to about databases or typing fairly quickly, and usually on the job. The expertise from years of editorial experience can come only one way.

**Mary Heffner**

Managing Editor

*American Journal of Neuroradiology*  
Chicago, Illinois

My: Since my topic was hiring and training a managing editor, my intent was to recommend the abilities needed to develop an efficient editorial office. Very large editorial offices may demand different abilities.

I agree with Ms Heffner that knowledge of editorial matters comes with experience and is invaluable. However, as a new managing editor 6 years ago, I was asked for little advice on editorial matters. My job was to speed 1000 scientific manuscripts a year

through a detailed review and revision process and to help the editor-in-chief select acceptable manuscripts for publication.

After reading Ms Heffner's letter, I spent some time pondering how I could possibly do my job as managing editor of *Stroke* if I could not type. I finally decided that I would adapt, but I would be far less efficient. I would also need more money in the budget to cover additional support staff, because I would have to spend a great deal of time dictating, proofreading, correcting, or even redictating letters and other material. With my typing skills intact, I can produce a letter in about the same time it takes to dictate it. Other tasks that I now handle would be nearly impossible. For example, if time permits, I occasionally fill in for absent staff members. This gives me a chance to understand the vantage point of other *Stroke* employees and to continually improve our procedures. Since we have a small staff, it also helps us keep up with the workflow.

I believe that the inability to type (or keyboard, as the kids now call it) is a serious handicap to anyone in the modern workforce, but especially to publishing professionals. Some journalists must agree, because many J-schools require students to know how to type.

As for database knowledge, it is true that I picked up database skills after becoming a managing editor. However, learning these critical skills on the job in the fast-paced *Stroke* office was very difficult. I don't recommend it.

It might be noteworthy that Dr Mark Dyken, our editor-in-chief, is himself an excellent typist and types many of his own letters, speeches, and articles. He suggests that typing skills might also be required of editors-in-chief. Occasionally, Dr Dyken has even drafted a letter for me. Does this make him *my* secretary?

This discussion reminds me of the snobbish, anti-feminist attitude years ago. Many of us will remember that women were actually warned not to learn to type. Else, they might find themselves typecast as secretaries and given low pay and little respect. Luckily, the world has progressed. Since staff members in the *Stroke* office create approximately 13 000 letters a year, "secretarial work" is the backbone of our office.

**Marilyn Michael Yurk**

Managing Editor

*Stroke* Editorial Office

Indiana University

Department of Neurology

Indianapolis, Indiana

## How to Contact CBE Headquarters

Telephone 847-480-9080

Fax 847-480-9282

E-mail cbehdqts@aol.com

Key CBE staff members and their extensions:

**Joe Samson**

*Executive Director*, extension 241

- Key representative for the Council
- Liaison to Board and committees

**Denise Baran**

*Administrative Director*, extension 221

- Information on all member services and events
- Publications fulfillment
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- Directory updates

**Marc Anderson**

*Annual Meeting Manager*, extension 236

- Liaison to the Program Committee, Local Arrangements Committee, Exhibitors, and Sponsors

**Andrea Blood**

*Meeting Administrator*, extension 233

- Annual Meeting registration
- Assistant liaison to Program Committee, Local Arrangements Committee, exhibitors, and sponsors

**Kirsten Lambert**

*Production Editor*, extension 238

- Liaison to *CBE Views* editor
- Oversees production of *CBE Views*