

From the Program Chair of the 1999 CBE Annual Meeting Facing the Future

As members of CBE, and as editors and publishers of science, we face many milestones in the coming months. On 1 January 2000, the world faces a new century and CBE takes on a new name, as the membership voted for late last year. We become the Council of Science Editors to acknowledge the inclusive nature of our organization, which has always included editors and publishers of scientific, clinical, and technical material. A task force led by Tad Parker, our president-elect, will develop and implement a plan for a new look and for making known what is new—and what has remained the same—about CBE. Facing the challenges of the year ahead, I think that rather than concentrate on the similarities in disseminating clinical and basic science, we need to look closely at the differences in research preparation and dissemination in what I call the cultures of these groups. How research is funded, how peer review is handled, the importance to researchers of formal publication or completion of research, and whether speed, accuracy, wide dissemination, and protection of data, including preliminary data, are important—all these need to be answered as we are pressed by outside forces to homogenize and democratize the dissemination of science.

As publishers of scientific material, we must try to divine why a proposal like E-biomed from the National Institutes of Health would come to light. Many editorial offices, associations, and publishers have already put much effort into getting research to their audiences—the scientists whose careers are based on publication of their research and the users of the publications, including libraries—faster and in electronically accessible ways. Witness the tremendous interest in new peer-review tracking systems and Web-based publishing systems at our recent annual meeting.

If, however it is done, we move toward a system of dissemination that is less meticulously peer-reviewed and is readily accessible to anyone connected to the Internet, we cannot ignore the reactions of the public, as was discussed at length at the open forum on E-biomed at the annual meeting. Medical editors and publishers are concerned about patient safety, and a system of warning labels was suggested that would state in plain English that the results of preliminary or unreviewed studies should not be used as a basis of diagnosis or treatment. Basic scientists seemed less concerned about the public's access, but they should not forget the power of public opinion with regard to animal research or research deemed expensive or unnecessary (especially when the public perceives that tax dollars paid for the dissemination of the research, as well as its original funding).

By dissecting the cultures of research, promotion, and data dissemination, developed by the likes of us during the last few hundred years, we can begin to see what will and will not work in our rush to improve things. It is ironic, for instance, that in the same year that many fear that computers, already carrying so much of our information, will hiccup at the mere change of an annual digit, we are faced with a proposal that suggests that a computer network is the most desirable way to store the entire scientific record permanently. Many, including me, believe that we should have an electronic archive, but until we define “permanent” and “accessible” in each of our cultures, the one-size-fits-all model could be a mistake.

What better way to discuss these changes and challenges than through active participation in the soon-to-be-called Council of Science Editors? The relationships we have built through our membership will stand us in good stead as we answer the questions before us and work, as we always have, to improve what we already do so well. ■

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