

◆ Online-Only Journals: Peer Review and Publication

Chair:

Martin Van Der Weyden

Editor, *Medical Journal of Australia*

North Sydney, Australia

Panelists:

Craig Bingham

Communications and Development Manager

Medical Journal of Australia

North Sydney, Australia

Patricia Baskin

Managing Editor, *GeneClinics*

University of Washington School of Medicine

Seattle, Washington

Reporter:

Andrew Berin

Cambridge University Press

New York, New York

Martin Van Der Weyden gave an overview of print-journal publishing, using the journal he edits as an example. The *Medical Journal of Australia* (MJA), Van Der Weyden said, publishes 23 times a year, is society-owned, and mails to about 26 000 subscribers, most of whom receive the journal as a benefit of membership. The MJA is expensive to produce and deliver. It is also slow to turn a manuscript into a published printed article, in part because of peer review, which can be slow, expensive, and imperfect (as shown by, for example, claims of bias engendered by anonymous reviews).

Van Der Weyden described an experiment at the MJA in which article and reviewer comments were posted online and readers were encouraged to comment. Relevant reader comments were passed to authors, and in some cases authors were invited to respond and further develop their

articles for eventual print publication. This kind of online peer review was welcomed by authors, reviewers, and readers. The average time for the completed review process—from first posting of article with peer review to further editorial development and finished article—was about 4 weeks. (See www.mja.com.au/public/papers/papers.html for details.)

Craig Bingham, also of the MJA, said that

Baskin said that about 30-35 iterations occur before an article is finally posted.

although his journal is fundamentally a print product, he spends an increasing amount of time working on the online edition. Bingham raised the following issues: Online journals, whether stand-alone or print-derived, should be treated as fundamentally different from their print counterparts through all phases of production; substantial cost savings are to be had in the online-only journal world, but revenue from subscribers and advertisers is still weak; the biomedical community lacks the coherence and technologic sophistication that allows the physics community to create and benefit from Paul Ginsparg's physics e-print archive; and print conventions should not be the model for online journals (PDF files provide only a "shadow" of the print journal and are therefore uninteresting).

Bingham described a model for archiving online articles. Once an article is published, a unique and permanent identifier is assigned. If the article is updated, the outdated version can remain available but with a new unique identifier attached so that the latest version

is always easily available (if bookmarked, for example). All versions of the article are clearly labeled and ideally include links to each other.

Patricia Baskin discussed *GeneClinics*, a medical-genetics "knowledge base" for use by primary-care physicians and geneticists. The publishing staff comprises 10 people, including a librarian and informatics staff, and is supported by grant money. The database features "disease profiles", each about 16-22 screens long. Keeping these current is essential because the service is used as a diagnostic tool. All aspects of production are online. Manuscripts, which are invited, are submitted by using a "GeneClinics Data Field" template that the author downloads and fills in. The submission is then posted on a password-protected site, and reviewers download the article so that they can make comments which are distinguishable from the original document. Authors are given a password so they can review comments. Authors then e-mail in their revisions. Copyeditors work online as well. Baskin said that about 30-35 iterations occur before an article is finally posted on the free public site. Because documents are dynamic, a versioning system keeps copies of originals and all revisions. Articles are updated "as often as needed". (See www.geneclinics.org for details.)

From my perspective, the title of the session was something of a misnomer in that MJA is not an online-only journal and *GeneClinics*, although offered only online, cannot be accurately described as a journal. However, the session was of great interest because it described a print journal's successful negotiation and experimentation in the online world and the inner workings of a sophisticated online-only product. ■