

# Scientific Editing Around the Globe: *Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde* (Dutch Journal of Medicine)

## Henk C Walvoort

In 1856 there were nine small medical journals in the Netherlands, all struggling to survive. Five of these joined hands and launched what has become the leading medical weekly in the Dutch language: the *Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde* (NTvG; *Dutch Journal of Medicine*).<sup>1</sup> There are currently 30,000 subscriptions, and about 90% of Dutch physicians—specialists as well as general practitioners—browse through the journal more or less regularly. A year's volume contains about 2600 pages.

## A Relatively Small Group of Peer Reviewers

About 800 manuscripts are submitted annually, of which about 65% are accepted for publication. A peculiarity of the NTvG is its small forum of core peer reviewers (about 20 at any given time), who make up the editorial board. They have consented to act as the main advisers in their fields of expertise for 3 years. Before they are asked to make that commitment, they are tested by refereeing some manuscripts. Only if the quality and punctuality of their responses is satisfactory are they asked to join the board of editors. Such a small peer-review forum makes communication easy and transparent as one gets to know its members quite well at the editorial office, including their likes and dislikes of particular topics; this is helpful in assessing their opinions when they serve as peer reviewers.

Why would someone take on such a heavy burden of refereeing with no

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financial compensation? The answer is that within the relatively small medical community in the Netherlands, being on the NTvG editorial board is seen as a sign of medical and scientific competence. It also gives the reviewers an opportunity to make serious contributions to the level of scientific communication in their medical specialties. Each year about 250 outside peer reviewers are asked to contribute their opinions for articles requiring special expertise.

## Importance of the Mother Tongue for Scientific Communication

Medical researchers often consider a publication in English to be of a higher standard than one in a “local” language such as Dutch. When the target readers are members of an international scientific community, publication in English is obviously appropriate. But the mere fact that a publication is in English is no indication of its importance. Research of a national scope, with national consequences, and financed with community funds should be published in the national native language.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the use of the mother tongue permits deeper and more balanced reasoning than the use of a second language, such as English. For example, we published an article on a neonate with Down syndrome and intestinal obstruction. The child could have been saved by abdominal surgery, but the parents and the physician decided that they would refrain from interfering, and the child died. The article resulted in a flood of letters to the editor from physicians and patient organizations. After 2 years of heated discussion in the letters section, the participants in the discussion resorted to quotations from the Dutch poets Ida Gerhardt and Vasalis to make clear what they meant by the words *life*

and *adult*. There the argument ended. A discussion at such a high level, involving the exact meanings of words, would have been impossible in a language other than the mother tongue.

When published in Dutch, study results are easily noticed and applied in clinical practice in the Netherlands. Often authors receive many reactions to an NTvG publication, whereas an article in an international journal can go unnoticed unless Dutch newspapers quote it in their medical sections. Finally, articles in Dutch give all Dutch clinicians the opportunity to read the scientific contributions in their original format and not via translation; this contributes to science-based clinical medicine in the Netherlands.

To facilitate access by non-Dutch readers and inclusion in international electronic databases, every article in the NTvG has an English abstract.

## Evidence-Based Editing

Scientists and clinicians are asked for evidence to support their findings and actions all the time, and editorial boards and offices must not lag behind. Therefore, about 10 years ago research on the characteristics of peer review and editing began at the NTvG office. Another subject of interest is the impact of the NTvG on clinical practice in the Netherlands. The journal is not listed in *Current Contents*, so authors receive no bibliometric credit for their articles. However, the articles have a notable impact on clinical practice. The Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences is redefining the system of measuring research output to include articles in peer-reviewed Dutch-language journals.

The research on editing has resulted in about 15 original contributions, some of which were considered of enough gen-

*Scientific Editing continued*

eral scientific relevance to be submitted to international journals.<sup>3,4</sup> One of the last research questions was whether the correspondence section in the journal had revealed serious flaws in original articles. The idea was that correspondence might be considered a kind of postpublication peer review. It turned out that 4% of the correspondence identified serious mistakes.

**Standards of Medical Editing**

The *NTvG* is a general medical journal, not a specialist one. To bridge the gap between the general medical readers and the specialists whose work is represented in most of the articles, several sections in the accepted papers must be clarified, simplified, and shortened by postacceptance editing,<sup>5</sup> which includes scientific editing and copyediting. Scientific editors think of themselves as the first readers in the medical audience of the journal: Everything that they do not understand must be changed or explained. Dutch linguists perform the copyediting.

The authors' style and language are treated with respect; their text must not be

changed for esthetic reasons only. We are not in the business of publishing literature; our main goal is the communication of scientific information. Therefore, changes are made only if an article does not comply with internationally accepted rules of scientific reporting (such as the "IMRAD" structure), if it cannot be understood with the help of current authoritative general and medical reference works (such as *Terminologia Anatomica*), or if its language does not comply with established Dutch rules of grammar and spelling. It is said that long ago articles were completely rewritten in the style of the editorial office. Nowadays, complaints from authors that "you have succeeded in making me dislike my own article" are rare. Journal references are checked against the MEDLINE database. The abstract is made informative; that is, it must provide information and not merely announce that information is to be found in the article.

**400,000 NTvG Pages Online**

To enhance the availability of medical information in the Netherlands, all *NTvG* volumes since 1857 have been digitized.

They are accessible to the journal's subscribers and, in part, to other visitors to [www.ntvg.nl](http://www.ntvg.nl). 

**References**

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