

# Editing and Scientific “Truth”: The Eighth EASE General Assembly and Conference

## Sally Edwards

On the evening of 8 June 2003, attendees from five continents and 28 countries met to discuss editing and scientific publishing and to celebrate the 21st anniversary of the European Association of Science Editors (EASE). The setting was the Guildhall in Bath, UK, amid paintings of nobles, crystal chandeliers, molded ceilings, and sunshine.

On that first day, the meeting began precisely on time (as it would on the following 3 days) with a keynote address followed by a civic reception in the world-famous Roman baths. The address, delivered by Sir Iain Chalmers, was titled “Bath and the Evolution of Fair Tests of Medical Treatments”.

## Good Medicine/Bad Medicine

“... doctors in Bath were among the pioneers in developing reliable methods for distinguishing useful from useless or positively dangerous medical treatments.”

Thus spoke Iain Chalmers, editor of the James Lind Library ([www.jameslindlibrary.org](http://www.jameslindlibrary.org)), a Web site launched to mark the 250th anniversary of the *Treatise of the Scurvy*. As explained on the site, this 1753 book contains a systematic review of what had been written about scurvy and one of the earliest accounts of a fair comparison of different medical treatments.

The disease had been killing thousands of people, especially sailors, every year. Lind’s analysis concludes with the now well-known remedy, oranges and lemons, as more effective than other treatments for scurvy.

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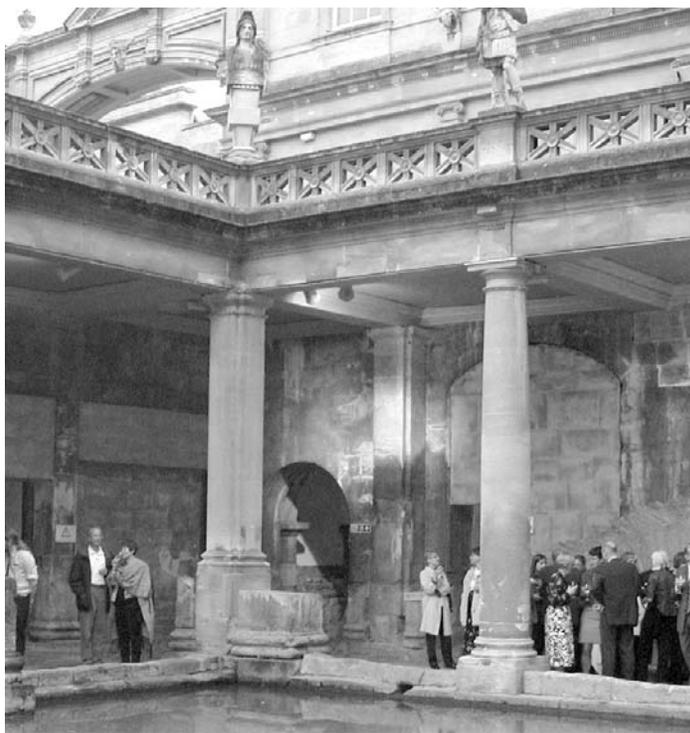
SALLY EDWARDS is director of publications for the Health Effects Institute in Boston. This nonprofit organization is funded by the Environmental Protection Agency and industry to provide scientific information and perspective on the health effects of air pollution.

But beyond the history of Lind’s book, this Web site offers a store of resources for uncovering the “truth” in the conference theme: short, well-written descriptions of chance, bias in its many forms, systematic review, and related historical records. Need more? The site edited by Chalmers was one of only five Web sites recognized in the Medicine category for the 2003 *Scientific American* Web awards.

## The Roman Baths

On that first evening, attendees were treated to a reception at the city’s Roman baths. As guests of the local government, we met the medaled mayor of Bath and others in the reception line. Feeling very special, we then enjoyed wine and hors d’oeuvres while walking the ancient stones and viewing the blue-green waters. The waters heated underground steamed upon emergence from the earth in a short falls over rocks stained a brilliant orange by the waters’ metals. In the pool, bubbles released by the hot water occasionally popped to the surface. The open court was guarded by life-sized, mute Roman sentinels extending from the tops of the walls into the sky.

These baths are no longer used for bathing. We were assured, however, that after August 2003 a modern set of baths would be open—a special treat for our next visit.



Meeting attendees chat in the main Roman bath at the reception sponsored by the local government. The room is open to the sky and the walls are guarded by stone sentinels.

## The Sessions and Workshops

All meetings for the conference were held in the city’s Guildhall, an elegant Georgian structure used for a variety of government occasions. At daily plenary sessions, presenters spoke about the gray areas in publication ethics, conflict of interest, and the evolution of peer review. A special session addressed surviving and thriving for journals from non-English-speaking countries. Leading this discussion were representatives from Spain, Mexico, and Croatia who described the purposes and challenges of their journals.

The variety of workshops ensured something for each attendee. My first was “Is Rewriting Ethical?” We concluded that rewriting is okay if it clarifies, if it saves embarrassment, and if the author approves. Rewriting is not okay to show the editor’s erudition, to impose the

editor's spin, or to inflate the editor's ego. In sum, rewriting is not always ethical but is often necessary.

Another workshop addressed standards in scientific data, nomenclature, and terminology. Presenters from Rome, Madrid, and the United States discussed the information overload and competing rules that surround sources of standards information. Important? Of course. As an example, they noted that in 1999, the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) lost a \$125 million Mars Orbiter because the supplier and NASA were using different standards for nomenclature. NASA might not agree, but certainly we have all seen major mishaps due to similar miscommunication.

In the closing session, John R Benfield, professor emeritus of surgery at the University of California, Davis, discussed challenges to authors for whom English is a second language. He noted that English is now the language of science and that

nonnative speakers of English contribute over half of peer-reviewed English scientific articles. His research has shown that these manuscripts require more revisions than those of native speakers and that the introduction and discussion sections present the greatest difficulty. He concluded that it is a privilege to be a native speaker of the language of science. Accordingly, he urged professional societies, editors, and publishers representing native speakers to accept responsibility for language assistance programs to those authors whose first language is not English.

### **Science Editors' Handbook**

A special surprise and treat is the Science Editors' Handbook that participants received with their registration. This deceptively simple looseleaf handbook packs wisdom in every sentence. There are four sections:

- Editing: editorial policy, procedure, reviewing, and ethical issues.

- Standards and Style: presentation, illustration, and format.
- Nomenclature and Terminology: general aspects, chemistry, medical sciences, biology, and earth sciences.
- Publishing and Printing: office management, printing issues, and communication.

I was especially impressed by a piece on copyediting of scientific papers written by Maeve O'Connor and Margaret Cooter. The text is enriched with numerous checklists for substantive editing, tables and figures, citations, and language editing. See the EASE Web site ([www.ease.org.uk](http://www.ease.org.uk)) for information on purchasing this modestly priced handbook.

### **Next EASE Conference**

EASE conferences are held every 3 years. The 2006 conference will be in Krakow, Poland. 🌐