

## Readers Speak Out

*Moderator:*

**Richard Newman**  
HighWire Press  
Palo Alto, California

*Panelists:*

**David L Roberts**  
Emory University School of Medicine  
Atlanta, Georgia

**Erica Brownfield**  
Emory University School of Medicine  
Atlanta, Georgia

**Laurence S Sperling**  
Emory University School of Medicine  
Atlanta, Georgia

*Reporter:*

**Barbara Gastel**  
Texas A&M University  
College Station, Texas

How do readers use journals? What do they like and dislike about them? What changes would they want? At this session, three early- to middle-career academic physicians described their use of journals and voiced their preferences. Of the panelists, two were general internists and one a cardiologist. All three were active in patient care and teaching; their involvement in research ranged from scant to substantial.

The panelists mentioned receiving many journals, some of them unsolicited, and struggling to keep up. Each panelist tries to stay current with several periodicals—either all journals or a mix of journals and newsletters presenting information from journals. Sometimes the panelists read only abstracts. They commonly tear out articles of interest and set them aside

to read later. One panelist characterized content of interest as falling into three categories: refresher information, material currently relevant, and material likely to be important later. A panelist mentioned asking staff to copy articles to distribute to trainees. The panelists generally reported limited success in filing articles effectively.

In response to the question of whether they wished to receive journals only electronically, the panelists conceded that paper would be saved but said that receiving journals in the mail was an incentive to read them and that articles were more readable in hard copy. A request for suggestions regarding print journals evoked the following comments: For easy access, the table of contents should be on the front of the journal. Abstracts are crucial. Graphics and color are desirable. Articles should undergo statistical review. Because readers like to tear out articles, a new article should not begin on the back of a page of another article, and advertisements on heavy paper should not appear within articles.

When asked about specific article categories, the panelists mentioned liking review articles. They do not read case reports much, but they search for relevant such reports when they encounter unusual cases. They vary in how much they read medical-humanities pieces in journals.

The panelists do not use journal-based continuing medical education (CME), inasmuch as they receive sufficient CME credits through other means, such as teaching and conferences. However, they considered such CME a valuable service. One panelist's spouse, who is also a physician, does use journal-based CME.

When asked about online journals,

the panelists said they did not use them much. To one panelist, the inconvenience of needing a password can be a disincentive. The panelists expressed interest in learning more about the features of online journals and how to use them. ("We don't know what we don't know", one said.) One recurrent theme was the need to ensure that content had reputable sources; another was the desire for aid in coping with the daunting amount of information available. Panelists said that "in a perfect world", an e-mail message would arrive once a week providing the tables of contents of the desired journals with links for accessing and printing articles.

The panelists expressed varied views about advertisements in medical journals: One ignores them, another looks at them quickly to see what is on the market, and the third studies them as a research interest. They noted annoyance with electronic popup ads. When asked whether they looked at financial disclosures in articles, panelists said that they did so when thinking of applying the information presented. At least one panelist expressed suspicion of journal supplements sponsored by single companies. In closing, panelists noted "trying to stay afloat" and presented a plea to "simplify things" so that readers get only the information they want.

After the session, some attendees said that they would like to hear from journal users in other fields. What about readers other than clinicians? For instance, what might basic-science researchers say about how they use journals and what they want? Future CSE meetings might offer good chances for additional populations of readers to speak out. 🗣️