

## EDITORIAL

As the Journal changes its editor-in-chief for the fifth time in its history, it seems appropriate, through the medium of an editorial column, to mark that change and reflect on the role of the Journal in the 1990s.

A principal role for a scientific journal is to provide a vehicle for research workers to make known the results of their work. Correspondingly, scientists are informed of the research of others. Thereby their own research is guided, undue duplication is minimized and concepts on which science depends for its progress and vitality are developed. Yet another important function is to maintain and even increase scientific standards through a rigorous but fair system of peer review. A flourishing discipline requires a wide range of organs of communication that can disseminate different aspects of the subject. The development of concepts is vital but access to basic information from which those concepts can develop is equally important. Furthermore, it is important to realize that the readership may not be confined to those engaged in research. Teachers and communicators of many kinds need to assimilate the results of the research worker as well as those whose primary role is to put scientific theory into practice.

A nutrition journal has a particularly daunting task. Nutrition is a relatively new science that is still developing even its most basic concepts. It could be argued that nutrition is not a science that stands alone but one that relies entirely on other disciplines, some as fundamental as chemistry, biochemistry and physiology; others dealing with human behaviour: psychology and sociology. Its many practitioners will have their individual leanings so that their published work will have a distinctly biochemical, physiological or sociological flavour. Nevertheless, they may all legitimately come under the umbrella of nutrition. Equally, some nutritionists may publish much of their work in journals devoted primarily to these more specialist disciplines and may pause to wonder whether other nutritionists, not so specialized, will ever discover their material.

Nutrition is further complicated by involving the study of any of the vast range of animal species. Many early advances that established nutritional concepts owe much to small laboratory animals such as the rat. Rarely are such studies pursued specifically for the advancement of knowledge of rat nutrition but to establish general principles and it is usually implicit that their ultimate goal is to advance human nutrition. Arguably the best developed branch of nutrition is our understanding of the nutritional needs of several economically important farm animals: principally cattle, pigs, sheep and poultry. Here it is possible to set precise objectives for the nutritional regimen: to achieve desired growth and carcass composition in a specified period of time with the greatest economic efficiency. Such clear goals have provided powerful incentives for rigorous experimentation. Much of this work is of general importance for the development of nutritional science and much is relevant to man, if only because what other motive is there for agricultural production than to provide food for mankind? We are now, in any case, living in an era where there is more interest in the nutritional composition of human food than ever before.

Nevertheless, many of the goals to which animal nutrition is directed do not apply to man. We are certainly interested in growth but optimum rates of growth and desirable body composition are matters of debate for a species that increasingly expects to live seven to eight decades. The problems that human nutrition has to address are many and diverse

around the globe. In one region, the combat of human hunger; in another, the way to deal with the consequences of over-abundance of energy and the avoidance of the diseases of affluence. Clinical nutrition aims to understand and satisfy the nutritional needs of people who are ill. The dietitian plays a vital role in putting into practice the current understanding of nutritional principles for the benefit of the healthy and unhealthy alike. Such is the wide scope of material for a nutrition journal.

Some nutrition journals specifically restrict themselves to one or other of these diverse areas: the nutrition of the farm animal or the laboratory animal, general human or clinical nutrition; others aim to span the breadth of the subject. This journal has always assumed the latter role and will continue to do so.

The *British Journal of Nutrition* was born in 1947 having been preceded by a few years by its sister journal, the *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*, which began in 1942 to provide a record of the meetings of the newly formed Nutrition Society. In 1944, the editors of the *Lancet* and the *British Medical Journal* joined with others in encouraging the Society to publish a journal that would contain original papers on the borderlines of nutrition and medicine for which there was otherwise no obvious outlet. This proved difficult during the war years but in 1947 the *British Journal of Nutrition* was created, incorporating the *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*. Later, in 1952, the Journal's reputation and the abundance of good papers was such that the *British Journal of Nutrition* and *Proceedings* were established as separate journals. Dr S. K. Kon, the first chairman of the editorial board of the *Proceedings* continued as chief editor of the separate *British Journal of Nutrition*. Kon had been first head of nutrition at the National Institute for Research in Dairying in Shinfield and was known as a perfectionist in editorial matters and in the writing of English. With his successor, C. C. Balch, the editorial office remained at Shinfield until it went, in 1970, with the new chairman, T. G. Taylor, to Southampton, thence to Liverpool with G. A. J. Pitt. It returned once more to Shinfield under the recent chairmanship of R. H. Smith.

The Journal has always considered that its remit is to publish work in farm animal, laboratory animal and human nutrition and in this it has followed the inclinations of the parent Society, which has always been proud to provide a forum for all these branches of nutrition. It has staunchly adhered to a policy of publishing the results of research of a more fundamental nature: work that 'advances nutritional concepts', and has avoided much that is observational or of direct application to animal production on the one hand or clinical nutrition on the other. I am making a distinction here between 'clinical nutrition' which relates to the very practical application of nutrition and dietetics to people who are ill and 'human nutrition', of which clinical nutrition is undoubtedly a small part, but which relates to the principles governing the proper nourishment of human beings during their normal lives and which should make its due contribution to the maintenance of good health.

Yet there are many who regard this remit as too narrow. They argue that to be a vigorous, flourishing discipline, alive to the needs of all mankind, nutrition should not be a subject solely for the research workers in their laboratories but should encompass the practical application of that research in the rural villages of the developing world, the teeming cities, the clinics and the corridors of power of public health departments. So, they argue, a flourishing journal should also reflect all these facets of the subject. They go further and imply that a journal that is aloof from 'the real world' will eventually lose its readership even among those primarily concerned with fundamental research. Others, particularly those accustomed to the rigorous design that can be adopted with animal experiments, fear that the desire to accept more material in human and especially clinical nutrition will result in a fall in scientific standards, allied to the difficulties in studying large enough numbers of subjects, for long enough, under adequately controlled conditions, using sufficiently precise methods. The responses must be, surely, that the Journal should

be among those campaigning for improved standards in the design and execution of human nutrition experiments and the development of improved methods for human metabolic studies.

The Journal is living in a changing world and needs to change with it. The numbers of papers received from the UK have been falling steadily and this is most apparent in the category of farm animal nutrition. The reasons for this cannot be stated with certainty but one cannot entirely escape the conclusion that the reduction in public funding of agricultural research in the UK has played its part. If the Journal is to remain in good health, it must attract more papers from overseas and more papers in the field of human nutrition. These were among the conclusions of a Working Group of the Editorial Board that reported recently. While there has been no dissent that the Journal stands among the foremost quality nutrition journals, with a high standard of scientific and statistical editing and refereeing, there was some concern that the journal was not the prime vehicle for the publication of some of the most exciting advances in human nutrition research. Some authors have found, disappointingly, that letters written by them to the correspondence columns of some competitor journals have attracted more interest and discussion than letters written to this journal. How then, should the Journal move forward into the 1990s?

To begin with 'style' as distinct from 'content', we will introduce several changes in layout and print style, including a new cover design (though not a different page size), a new abstract format and key-word indexing beginning with volume 62 in July 1989. Sectioning of the papers on the contents page will no longer be into such categories as 'General Nutrition' or 'Clinical and Human Nutrition' but will follow more physiological classifications. In this way papers on nutritional influences on human and cow's milks may be side by side in a section on 'lactation' while other sections on 'growth' or 'energy metabolism' may also deal with several species. We hope that this might stimulate people working in human nutrition to see the relevance to them of significant papers on farm animals and vice versa. Any changes that affect the way in which authors need to prepare their manuscripts will be signalled in revised 'instructions to authors' to be issued shortly. Needless to say, there is a diversity of view about such 'cosmetic' changes from those who consider that excellence of scientific content alone determines whether a journal gets the readership it deserves and those, equally dedicated to their science, who consider that appearance plays an important role in attracting readers. Wherever the truth may lie, the forthcoming changes will not be dramatic, but will serve to give the journal a fresh appearance and to signal to our readers that we are an evolving organism, thoughtful of the needs of today's readership.

In regard to the more important aspect of 'scientific content', the Journal will encourage a wide range of first-class papers on all aspects of the science of nutrition and those related disciplines where there is sufficient of a nutritional theme that the work would be of more interest to a nutrition readership than the readership of more specialist biochemical, physiological or endocrinological journals. Although the mainstay will continue to be those papers that report fundamental science, the Journal will welcome those of more direct application and relevance to today's nutritional problems, general, clinical and agricultural, both in developed and less developed countries. It is not true, as one recent correspondent to the office implied, that the Journal is concerned only with the nutritional problems of cosy Britain.

Some have argued that a change of name would reinforce our commitment to these global ideals but the advantages would, we think, be outweighed by a sense of a loss of continuity. 'British' will refer to the home of the Journal's parent Society, decidedly not to the nature of the problems and material to be covered.

The Journal's main criteria for the acceptability of papers will be the pertinence of the

scientific questions asked, the quality of experimental design and execution, the clarity with which the objectives are stated, the results presented and the conclusions drawn, and the succinctness of the discussion. The Journal particularly wishes to encourage authors to submit short precise papers without (alas too common!) over elaborate and wordy discussion. For the time being, we will avoid a specific 'rapid communications' section. Such a policy implies to many, rightly or wrongly, a hasty acceptance of second-rate material and a relaxation of scientific standards. Nevertheless, we would emphasize that the shorter and more concise the paper, the more likely it is that it will progress rapidly through the editorial system and the more impact will it have with the readers.

Having stressed this point, it should be stated that by no means does this imply that there will be no room in the Journal for what might be termed 'archival material'. Many worthwhile nutrition projects continue over many years and involve the painstaking accumulation of a wealth of basic data. Not only can these provide valuable reference material but their prominence in a widely read journal can help to guard against that well known phenomenon, the reinvention of the wheel! As a consequence of the greater diversity in types of material that the Journal hopes to publish, there will be some relaxation of the conventions for sectioning the text. Thus, there may sometimes be good reasons for combining 'Results and Discussion' or for introducing additional sections, such as 'Objectives' or 'Conclusions' rather than always adhering slavishly to the conventional sequence: introduction, materials and methods, results, discussion.

Finally as regards scientific content, we wish to encourage our readers to take up their pens and contribute to our correspondence columns which will be given more prominence than hitherto. Comment can include criticism of the design of experiments reported in the Journal, the authors' conclusions, the (brief!) statement of hypotheses suggested, perhaps, by results published in the Journal, reactions to the leader column or observations on topical issues in nutrition. Some material will, of course, lack the impact in a two-monthly journal compared with those published weekly, but some material will be robust enough to overcome this drawback.

To conclude, I have used this editorial to inform readers of some forthcoming changes envisaged and of some of our aspirations for the future. The Leader will become, I hope, a regular feature. It will not necessarily be uniform in style, in purpose or in authorship, although the latter will always be declared. Its role may range from news and information, as in this edition, to comment on serious nutrition issues of the day, perhaps as highlighted by publications in the current edition of the Journal. If you, our readers, wish to make your comment, why not write 'a letter to the editor' and, of course: watch this space!

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