

EDITORIAL

Directions from a reader

A few Editorials back I wrote discussing what the contributors expected of a scientific journal such as the *British Journal of Nutrition*. This resulted in a letter from a regular reader of the Journal from outside the nutritional field suggesting that we should also consider the needs of readers who were not necessarily potential contributors but who read the journal to expand their nutritional knowledge for use in other areas of study. I thought that this raised some interesting points, hence the invited Editorial which follows from Dr F. D. Richardson of the Department of Applied Mathematics in the University of Cape Town, South Africa.

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The needs of readers

Journals are probably the most important means of communication between scientists. They can only perform this function if they attract both authors and readers. Recent journal editorials and professional society newsletters have mentioned that a journal must attract a range of the best research papers in its field. They have also focused on the needs of contributors to have their work published and how authors can assist the process. The needs of readers seem to be ignored. This is unfortunate as it is the readers who cite papers, evaluate the practical implications of the findings and ultimately determine the place of the reported work in the body of knowledge.

Why do readers need primary journals when abstracting journals and electronic scanning services cover most fields of scientific endeavour? As pointed out in an earlier editorial, both of these have limitations due to the keywords published with the original paper. Furthermore, even a well prepared scanning profile misses important papers. Obtaining a copy of a paper in a journal not held by the reader's institutional library may involve considerable delay and expense. The implication is that readers do need access to primary journals. This is confirmed by the observation that one of the busiest sections of a scientific library is that where the current issues of journals are displayed.

Before we can establish the needs of readers of a journal we need to know who those readers are. There is a belief that the readers of a scientific journal are more or less the same people as its potential contributors. While this may be true for some very specialized publications it is almost certainly not true for the *British Journal of Nutrition* because nutrition lies at the interface of a number of scientific disciplines. In addition, nutrition can be the well understood core that links parts of a larger system together. An example of this is a pastoral economy dependent on semi-arid rangeland. Nutritional science provides information and understanding of the factors that influence the selection, voluntary intake and digestibility of the diet of grazing animals, the amounts of nutrients absorbed and the efficiency of their utilization for production. This is the link between weather, soils and herbage growth on the one hand and the output of animal products on the other. Similarly,