

EDITORIAL

‘Where’s the beef?’

One quite common reason for rejection of a paper is that it is judged ‘not substantial enough’ for publication as a full paper in the *British Journal of Nutrition*. This decision is one of those that at first sight appears very subjective and is one that, for this reason alone, causes me the most concern as I compose the letter to the authors. I also suspect that alongside rejection on the grounds that the work described in the paper is not original, rejection on the grounds of being insubstantial is most likely to cause offence to authors. I thought therefore that it would be useful to share some thoughts on which criteria could be used to judge whether a paper is substantial or not.

Length is clearly not a criterion because every biological scientist is aware of how a scientific revolution can be initiated from one seminal page. Most editors of scientific journals would, as a rule, I suspect, welcome shorter, more concisely written papers. At the *British Journal of Nutrition* it would mean that we could reduce the time between acceptance and publication. Having worked very closely with several technical editors, I know at first hand how a skilled editor can, with a well-tuned pencil, turn a clumsy long sentence into one that is shorter and clearer.

Content is clearly the only attribute that defines whether a paper is substantial. This does not mean that because the experimental work is not extensive the paper will be rejected; well-designed and critical studies, albeit limited, which test an hypothesis can make a substantial contribution to the development of nutritional science or any other branch of science, whereas interminable, poorly designed studies will never do so. This said, I feel that some experimental studies seem to be low on the number of replications, although those involved in human studies or with large animals will not thank me for saying so. Where *in vitro* studies of biological processes are involved, thorough replication does seem to me to be critically important.

The essential judgement must be made in relation to the contribution that the paper makes to the advancement of the subject. Is it possible to make this assessment any more objective? I suspect that it is extremely difficult to form any assessment of the relationship of **content** to **contribution to knowledge** that is not partly subjective. Possibly it would help if authors were a little more explicit about the significance of the findings in their papers.

I am just reading, as first editor, a paper which comes from a very distinguished nutritional group, with a large number of well-respected and competent authors. The paper is well-written, the experimental measurements are sound and I think that the statistics are all right (I await an expert opinion on this) but I had to read the paper twice before I realized the major significance of the paper. It was hidden in the conventional downbeat language of the professional scientist. In this case there is little doubt that the paper is substantial enough for publication, but the point remains, if you think that your paper makes a significant contribution, whatever its length, why not spell it out, at least in the Summary. If it does not make a contribution perhaps the paper should best be consigned to a file analogous to one I call ‘lost causes’.

Quite often authors submit two or more papers as a series. Sometimes we feel that the individual elements are not substantial in themselves but if combined they would be. I

recognize the desire to accumulate numbers of publications, but as far as the Journal is concerned we prefer material that belongs logically together to be in one paper. In addition there is a practical reason: very often the bibliographies of a series of papers have many references in common so that if we publish a series we may in fact be replicating the publication of possibly a page of identical references. This could mean that another author may have to await another month for publication.

I think that it is important for all authors to make it clear how their papers advance nutritional understanding. It is critically important if you have a paper that contains a limited amount of experimental work or data to make sure that the importance of the content is clear. In addition, any authors whose paper is rejected as being insubstantial have a defence which they should present by stating in what way their paper contributes to knowledge.

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