Letters to the Editor

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Main task of editor and author is to communicate with reader, not with each other.

Readers have perfect right to fire off personal messages to editor – warm flattery or hot pokers.

They should make it clear whether they are asking editor to publish or merely to read and meditate on their offering.
• Correspondence between researchers on worldwide basis lies at foundation of scientific and clinical strides

• Began to emerge in 15th century when scientists across Europe exchanged ideas and challenged each other’s thinking
Purpose today

• Important aspect of development, discussion and exchange of ideas

• To challenge or support ideas that have gone through peer review, correct mistakes, and initiate dialogue between researchers and clinicians

• Should not be a method for avoiding peer review or creation of large list of publications
“All biomedical journals should have a section carrying comments, questions or criticisms about articles they have published and where the original authors can respond”

-- *JAMA* 1997;277:927-34
Why would anyone write a Letter?

- To see name in print
- Opinionated about an article
- Feel strongly about a health issue
- Want to share interesting data (original, cases, etc), but not enough material for full report
- (To avoid peer review)
Types

1. Commenting on earlier publications
2. Presenting data or findings in brief
3. Expressing opinions on health-related issues
4. Communicating interesting case material
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Fair game?

“A man who runs for public office, an author who publishes a book, an artist who paints a picture, an actress who goes on the stage are usually fair game for a kind of criticism which could not with legal safety be levelled against a private person.”

-- Kesterto, 1976
To the Editor

I am writing to comment on Dr. Sahni’s article on surgery for cirrhotic portal hypertension. He reported five complications in 100 cases. I have performed 500 cases in the past year, with only two complications.

I suggest that Dr. Sahni enroll in my training course or repeat his residency so that he may learn to operate.

-- A. Creep
Reply from the author

We thank Dr Creep for his interest in our report.

The estimated prevalence in India of cirrhotic portal hypertension that needs surgery is only 100 cases per year.

Perhaps the reason for the difference in our results is that we operate only on patients who have appropriate indications and demonstrable disease.

-- P. Sahni
Lesson 1

Do not use the Letters column to settle personal scores
Types

1. Commenting on earlier publications
2. Presenting data or findings in brief
3. Expressing opinions on health-related issues
4. Communicating interesting case material
Problems

• Writers often take opportunity to present additional data from research that he or she has published or has no real hope of publication as peer-reviewed article

• Once published, such Letters can be cited as publications, quoted in other articles, and used in support of grant and job applications

• Letters in journals of repute have potential to acquire a respect that they may not warrant
Lesson 2

You can fool some of the people some of the time …

(you know the rest of it)
Types

1. Commenting on earlier publications
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4. Communicating interesting case material
High stakes

- Some industries (tobacco) reportedly have paid authors up to $10,000 to have Letters published in high-profile scientific journals, to stake a position or refute published articles.
Lesson 3

Don’t join a war unless you have a stake in it

(will someone tell this to Tony Blair?)
Preventing problems

- Letters that provide new ideas or data to support new hypotheses should be subject to review process.
- This process should parallel journal’s approach to original research and review.
- Publish Letters only on Web (Postgrad Med J 2004)
An alternative: electronic publication

- Online readers’ forum
- Lively exchange on Internet
- Readers can follow original article and all subsequent discussions
- Similar to interactive discussion “threads” on websites and Internet discussion groups
Editors love Letters

Editors cherish Letters commenting on published articles because

– They prove that someone is reading the journal and takes it seriously

– They are usually well prepared
Rejection rates by BMJ

- Research papers 85%
- Letters
  - About middles 66%
  - About editorials 57%
  - About research papers 43%*

*p<0.01

How to write Letters that get published

- Decide whether Letter is for editor's eyes only or for publication
- Put this in writing
- Carefully construct Letter
- Remove temptation to dictate Letter: oral and written communications differ
- Make one point; make it clearly and quickly (400-500 words)
- Pare out repetition, unnecessary detail and empty phrases
Summary

How to write …

• Avoid emotive language
• Use same style as scientific article
• Have a little fun. Be witty or clever if subject warrants it
• Put Letter on shelf for day or two and then re-read it
• If you enjoy re-reading it, show to colleague who is indifferent to its message
• If colleague understands Letter, mail it
• Not every Letter need be mailed