

Passing the baton at high speed: time to hand over to a new editorial board.

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Editorial

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Following a 70-year-old tradition, *The Journal of Clinical Investigation (JCI)* will change hands again during March through April of this year, moving its editorial offices from La Jolla, California to Ann Arbor, Michigan. This tradition of editorial transitions ensures that *JCI* can reinvent itself every five years, and thereby adjust to the changing times. The selection of Stephen J. Weiss of the University of Michigan as the new Editor was the result of a nationwide search, in which detailed applications were submitted by many prospective candidates, who were nominated by their respective universities. The next issue of *The Journal* will carry an Editorial by Dr. Weiss, in which he will outline his plans for the next five years. We will focus here upon the modifications that the La Jolla group has made in the *JCI* during the last five years.

The primary goal of the *JCI* is to publish original, high-quality work regarding human and mammalian biology, physiology, and medicine (the terms "biology" and "physiology" being interpreted in the broadest possible sense, to be inclusive of all types of research on humans). *The Journal* has remained in the top echelons of biomedical publications at least partly because of a tradition of thorough and critical reviews of submitted papers. However, many authors had previously regarded the review process as being too slow. When the La Jolla group took over, the previous Editors had already begun to streamline the handling of manuscripts (1). However, the *JCI* had also become a victim of its own success, and was experiencing an increased volume of manuscript submissions (see Fig. 1). We therefore instituted several changes aimed at improving the speed and efficiency of the review process, without compromising quality. These included the introduction of a uniform submission form, further computerization of manuscript tracking, liberal use of FAX and overnight mailing services, limitation of revisions to a single cycle, and the introduction of a screening review system for manuscripts. Of all these, the most novel (and consequently, the most controversial) was the screening review process. The rationale behind this system is outlined elsewhere (1, 2). Subsequent evaluation indicated that while not without its own flaws, this system appeared successful from the perspective of most authors, reviewers, and the editors (2, 3). If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, it is interesting to note that many other journals have copied various aspects of the changes we have instituted in the *JCI*. Overall, these new measures have resulted in a marked reduction in the time from submission to first decision (see Fig. 1). This, together with a change to semimonthly publication, and other measures instituted by our publisher (The Rockefeller University Press) resulted in a significant reduction in the time from submission to final publication (see Fig. 1, note that this includes the time consumed by the authors in making and submitting revisions). Further reductions in these time periods can be anticipated with increasing use of electronic reviewing, copyediting, and publishing. It may also be possible to consider

publishing the electronic version of the journal as soon as it is available, allowing the paper version to appear later.

One measure of the success of *The Journal* is that the number of manuscript submissions have continued to escalate (see Fig. 1) despite the launch of many new, potentially competitive journals, e.g., *Nature Medicine*, *Molecular Medicine*, *Journal of Investigative Medicine*, *Journal of Molecular Medicine*, and the new version of the *Proceedings of the Association of American Physicians*. Another gratifying feature has been the steady increase in the proportion of manuscript submissions from outside the U.S. (see Fig. 1). With more than a third of all published 1996 papers coming from outside the country, the *JCI* appears to have completed the transition from a U.S. academic society journal to a truly international journal of biomedicine. On the other hand, as a nonprofit publication with limited space, *The Journal* must now achieve an acceptance rate of $\sim 20\%$, with the possibility of even lower rates in the future. The new Editors thus face the challenge of maintaining the fairness and objectivity of the review process, while making more difficult priority decisions. In this regard, we have tried to assure all authors that they are competing on a level playing field, by regularly publishing a detailed statement of the editorial policies and procedures of *The Journal* (see January 1 issue). To further assure fairness, we do not discuss manuscripts over the telephone, and have completely avoided the practice of "pre-approval" and "inside-track" publishing of papers believed by their authors to deserve special handling. This leaves *JCI* at a potential disadvantage relative to some other prominent journals that routinely follow these practices, promoting the concept of "hot" science and "hot" authors. However, we believe that our commitment to fairness leaves *The Journal* in the best ethical position to face the challenges currently being mounted against the peer review system.

In times past, research on humans was performed largely by "clinical investigators" based in medical schools, often in clinical departments. Recognizing the substantial increase in the number of "basic science" researchers taking a leading role in studying humans, the Editors have devoted considerable effort towards attracting the participation of such individuals. This was partly achieved by creating an expanded Board of Consulting Editors, and by involving all types of researchers interested in human biomedical research in the review process. In this regard, another recent innovation has been the introduction of Perspectives Series, the serial publication of commissioned pieces by authorities of many backgrounds in a given field (4–6). These have substantially replaced our traditional Perspectives articles on assorted unrelated topics, a function now being amply served by many new publications dedicated almost solely to reviews. An added advantage is that compendia of such related Perspectives can be prepared and disseminated for the use by the biomedical research community for various purposes, including teaching.

Another change has been the introduction of commissioned Editorials that highlight the findings of a few papers in each issue that were very highly rated by reviewers and editors. The authors of these papers (along with those of other articles judged by the Editors to be newsworthy) have the opportunity to write a brief descriptive statement of their findings in

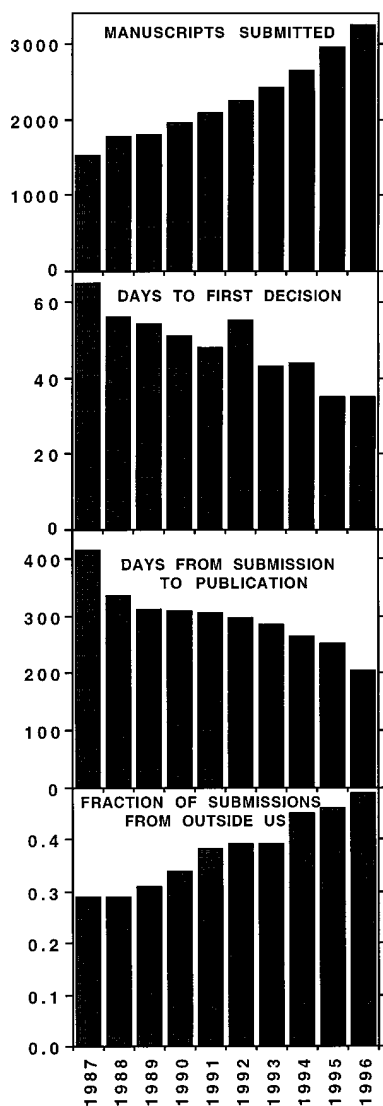


Figure 1. JCI trends for the past decade, including manuscript submission rates; average number of days from submission to first decision; average number of days from submission to final publication (accepted manuscripts only, includes time spent by authors in preparing revisions); and the fraction of manuscript submissions from outside the USA.

lay terms. These informational pieces are reviewed and then sent to a carefully selected group of biomedical journals and scientific press writers. Thereafter, *The Journal* does not attempt to influence the dissemination of this information, but leaves it to the science writers and authors to interact as needed. The goal is to fulfill the obligation of the scientific community to make its findings known to the public, without unnecessarily exaggerating or distorting the information.

The advent and rapid expansion of the Internet required that *The Journal* move quickly into full-scale electronic publishing. This was achieved last year with the help of Stanford University's HighWire Press™, and the full text electronic ver-

sion of the *JCI* is now available to anyone with access to the World Wide Web at <http://www.jci.org>. These electronic files contain many useful links, not only to literature references, but also to Web sites of vendors of materials used in the studies. In addition, reprint quality PDF files can be downloaded by any browser, anywhere in the world. As with all journals, the *JCI* faces a potential loss of revenue from the resulting cancellation of paper subscriptions. However, since the primary purpose of the *JCI* is to disseminate new knowledge, it is worthwhile to seek creative ways to keep the full-text journal free to the world-wide scientific community on the Internet. This possibility can only be considered because the *JCI* is a nonprofit publication that is not dependent upon advertising revenue.

The Editor of the *JCI* has complete responsibility not only for the peer review of articles, but also for all aspects of the management and finances of *The Journal*, as well as interactions with the publisher. With *The Journal* currently receiving almost 300 manuscripts a month, the changeover is thus like passing the baton in a fast-moving relay race — it should be as well coordinated as possible, with minimal loss of momentum, while taking full advantage of a fresh pair of legs. This is a goal to which the La Jolla and Michigan groups have committed themselves. Authors should note that all new manuscripts should go to the University of Michigan office after March 1, 1997, and all revisions after April 18 should do the same (see announcement in this issue).

It remains then for us to thank those who have had made all the successes of the last five years possible: the Associate Editors, Consulting Editors, Managing Editors, and Office staff (listed on the masthead of this issue for the last time) for their dedication and hard work; The UCSD School of Medicine and the La Jolla Veterans Administration Medical Center for being our gracious hosts; The Rockefeller University Press and Stanford University's HighWire Press™ for so ably producing and disseminating *The Journal*; and last but not least, the authors and reviewers of the international biomedical scientific community, without whom the *JCI* would not exist.

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for The Editorial Board

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