

## *Editorial*

### **References Rationalised**

K. G. M. M. Alberti

Amongst the many tasks which the would-be author has to perform in order to speed the fruits of his labours into glowing print, preparation of the reference list is one of the most tedious. It is of interest that this, the most menial of tasks is so often performed inadequately. The reasons behind this would afford a psychologist (or psychiatrist?) a few weeks of peaceful and interesting study.

The excitement of research occurs of course in the early stages. First, a hypothesis is formulated, either by a series of rational arguments or as happens in my own case by a flash of blinding intellectual light which comes at totally inappropriate times. (I have only ever had three ideas of my own: one came in a traffic jam at an Oxford roundabout, one came during an entertaining, if inappropriate, lecture, by an eminent British diabetologist, and the last came during a totally unprintable activity.) The hypothesis then has to be tested, preferably by a keen eager research fellow, who is in desperate need of a good reference. Then comes the mouth-watering anticipation while waiting for the results. The first results then either destroy the hypothesis, or, very occasionally, support it. At this stage you frequently have to restrain your colleagues from writing immediately to the *Lancet*: I note that the more senior the collaborators, the more likely they are to slip a letter off. After this it is all downhill. “n” has to be increased to at least five – one aberrant result and “n” may have to equal ten. This is followed by the ritualistic statistical tests, although there is much sense in the advice given to me as a Ph. D. student that if you have to use statistics to prove an effect is significant it probably is biologically insignificant. (I exempt epidemiological studies from this last statement – there is little enough pleasure in epidemiology without removing the pleasure of seeing t and r and p values rolling out of the colon of some computer).

That completes most of the pleasurable side of research. A little added vicarious pleasure can be obtained by presenting the data at a meeting, preferably on some balmy isle, and basking in the plaudits of the crowd. You can guarantee that in any audience there will always be at least two misfits who will be interested in even the most tedious and inaccurate piece of work. The professionals will indeed manage to present their work in at least three or four different places (this is not the place to discuss the problems of the travelling circus of senior citizens (?) who travel round the world talking to each other in front of variegated audiences).

The crunch comes when the work has to be written up properly and presented for peer review. Most research workers find writing difficult, tedious and frustrating. There is, however, no point in doing research unless the work is communicated – it is otherwise a waste of resources and time and becomes an entirely selfish, parasitic pursuit, playing games at somebody else’s expense.

Let us assume that a paper will however be written. A particular journal is selected for various reasons: speed of publication, prestige, presumed friendship with the editor, or even because it is appropriate for the subject. At this stage many workers appear to suffer neuronal deficits. Nothing is calculated to irritate an editor more than to receive a paper which has been written with little or no regard for the journal’s usual style. Occasionally it is obvious that the paper has been diverted from another journal’s reject heap, but generally it is just plain carelessness and sloppiness. It seems self-evident that if you are trying to sell your product you package it in the most appropriate and attractive way. About 10% of *Diabetologia*’s authors seem to follow this rule; about 50% are acceptable; and the rest are guaranteed to produce varying degrees of catecholamine drive in the E-in-C.

And that brings us back to references. In defence of the author there is little more boring than having to rewrite a paper in a different style after it has been rejected by a journal. It is also tedious to have to follow a series of apparently petty quirks when producing a paper.

In an attempt to diminish the tedium and to start to bring uniformity and order to the stylistic chaos of the medical literature two agreed formats for the presentation of references have been produced, one by ELSE-Ciba and one by the International Steering Committee of Medical Editors. It is of course too much to hope that a single system could have been produced. We (for no very good – or very bad – reason) have elected to use the ELSE-Ciba system.

As a consequence, starting with the July issue (Volume 19, Number 1) *Diabetologia* will change its reference style to conform to ELSE-Ciba's recommendations. Those of you still prepared to submit papers to us are asked to adopt this style from now in order to facilitate editing.

Examples of the new style (which do not indeed differ markedly from our previous practice) are as follows:

#### *1. Standard Journal Articles*

Molnar GD, Marien GJ, Unter AN, Harley CH (1979) Methods of assessing diabetic control. *Diabetologia* 17: 5–16

#### *2. Books and Monographs*

Nachmansohn D (1979) *German-Jewish Pioneers in Science 1900–1933*. Springer, Berlin Heidelberg New York

#### *3. Chapter in Book*

Knibbs S, Jackson JGL (1975) Social and emotional complications of diabetes. In: Kenn H, Jarrett J, (eds) *Complications of diabetes*. Edward Arnold, London, p 265–277

References should be numbered consecutively in the order in which they are first mentioned in the text, and should be identified by arabic numerals in parentheses. Journal abbreviations should, as at present, follow the style of *Index Medicus*. “Unpublished observations” and “personal communications” may not be used as references. For articles accepted for publication but not yet published give the title of the journal and “in press” in parentheses.

Hopefully this is but the first in a series of moves towards the rationalisation of the presentation and publication of papers.

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