The Importance of Continuing the Dialogue: A Fellow's Perspective on Letters to the Editor

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Every medical toxicology fellowship training program has a Journal Club, where both faculty and trainees get together to review articles that impact the field of medical toxicology. The articles reviewed may vary, from recently published articles to controversial articles to historical articles that impact our daily clinical practice and inform our own future research. Overwhelmingly articles chosen for Journal Club have one thing in common—they can mostly be classified as original research articles that introduce new data to our field of expertise. We gravitate toward reviewing original research articles due to a learned belief they have the most to contribute to medical literature. Unfortunately, during Journal Club we infrequently do formal reviews of other types of articles, such as review articles, editorials or commentaries, or letters to the editor. Medical toxicology is a field with limited randomized controlled trials; toxicologic expertise is often derived from clinical experience. As a specialty, we must recognize the value and limitations of all types of journal publications.

Regardless of the publication type, articles go through numerous stages of review before being published. Once drafted, articles are first internally reviewed by all contributing authors prior to being submitted to a journal. After submission, the journal editor decides if the manuscript is worthy of peer review and sends it to multiple volunteer peer reviewers. These reviewers analyze the manuscript and provide feedback to the decision editor who determines if the manuscript should be published and, if so, whether further revisions are required prior to publication. In some cases, there might be multiple rounds of revision requested before the manuscript is accepted for publication.

It is important for all readers to remember that the review process does not stop once an article is published by a journal. A published article is only the beginning of the dialogue, as toxicologists around the world read and discuss and debate the paper within their internal groups. Criticism often happens in Journal Clubs and among colleagues, with multiple small groups of experts having similar isolated discussions. Every article is an opportunity for readers to provide additional external perspective, and it is essential that this dialogue be moved to a public forum to connect all readers, regardless of geographic location. One traditional method of furthering the public dialogue is to submit correspondence to journals in the form of a “Letter to the Editor.” Journals and editors refer to this process as postpublication peer review [1, 2].

Letters to the editor provide an ideal opportunity to add ongoing dialogue that is both respectful and productive. While the guidelines for submitting a letter at some journals may be initially confusing for trainees, the *Annals of Emergency Medicine* and *JAMA* offer great resources on how to write an effective letter to the editor [1, 2]. There is flexibility in what can be addressed in a letter, but generally letters should present specific questions to the original authors or different interpretations of the data to readers. Letters should not contain only criticism, as this too often comes across as criticism of the journal specifically. Like original research articles, letters may go through a review process to determine if they address something readers would find of interest. If accepted for publication by the journal, a letter is usually sent to the authors of the original publication who are given a chance to reply. This process also gives authors of the original article and editors of the journal the chance for their own commentary, as letters to the editor may bring up points that were discussed during the initial review process but did not make it into the final manuscript.

Of note, there is no obligation for a journal to publish all submitted letters to the editor, and many journals with high impact factors may have never published a letter. In cases of

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journals without a clear submission process for letters, a recommended first step is to reach out to the journal editor and inquire about a potential submission in the form of such correspondence. The author of the letter should clearly delineate the goals of the proposed letter and ask about suggested next steps. If the journal is willing to consider publishing a letter for the first time, editors will need to create a pathway for the submission, which will require additional time and patience from both the submitting authors and journal editors. While this might initially discourage submission of letters to these journals, I encourage readers to remember that when an original article deserves comment from us, it is our responsibility to write a letter and continue the dialogue within the scientific community. *JMT* welcomes letters to the editor: see the Poison Pen section for comments in the form of a letter from readers on recently published papers in this journal.

It is crucial for trainees to know how to read and interpret all types of articles published in journals, including letters to the editor. Patients, public health professionals, policymakers, and other stakeholders expect us, as physicians and specialists, to be familiar with the most up to date literature, and sometimes a letter adds to or clarifies published knowledge. When searching an online journal or PubMed, letters to the editor are often tagged or linked to the original article. If selecting an article for Journal Club that has associated letters to the editor, these letters should be read and discussed as well. Letters represent what other readers are thinking about and can further discussion among colleagues and trainees. Furthermore, trainees must also be familiar with conducting thorough and inclusive literature reviews, as articles pertaining to toxicology are not limited to publication in toxicology-specific journals. It is our duty as experts to analyze and discuss articles regarding toxicologic issues regardless of where they are published, and we should feel an obligation to write letters to journals outside of our specialty that have published toxicology-relevant papers. For trainees, submitting to journals outside of our field also provides opportunity to broaden our writing experience.

In summary, an article that is published should not be frozen in time. This is an open invitation for all medical toxicologists, especially trainees, to write a letter to the editor. These letters are an opportunity for fellows-in-training to hone their writing skills and create respectful debates within the field of toxicology. In my experience, writing letters to the editor during fellowship training taught me how to produce a short manuscript that was appropriately critical but narrowly focused, with the overarching goal of advancing knowledge. We as specialists must pay attention to evolving literature, and it is essential that we contribute to the postpublication review process by speaking up with commentary on original toxicology research. To my co-fellows in medical toxicology training, I encourage you to seek out and read letters to the editor, to write letters to journals in all medical fields, and most importantly, to continue the dialogue.

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