



High noon for biomedical journals?

It would seem a solution is at hand for medical researchers frustrated with the long lag between manuscript submission and publication. According to Ron LaPorte, PhD, self-publishing on the Internet will overcome the time lag while also allowing authors to keep ownership of their work.

LaPorte, a professor of epidemiology at the University of Pittsburgh, argues that “journals have monopolised scientific communication” and “end up owning very valuable intellectual property which they barely contributed to making.”

Scientists in some other disciplines apparently agree. For years physicists have been using the Internet to publish their work, submitting articles to a computer repository and getting fast electronic feedback via the same computer. Those articles may eventually be published in print, but the electronic “preprints” are the first line of communication with their colleagues.

Could this — or should this — ever happen in medicine? The conventional wisdom says No, because there’s too great a danger to public health from dissemination of invalid

research and unproven theories. Careful peer review and revision via journals are essential to avoid misleading the public and the medical profession.

However, there are other viewpoints, and not just LaPorte’s. You can read some of them in print and on the Web in the *British Medical Journal* by checking out “Posting preprints on the Internet” (<http://www.tecc.co.uk/bmj/preprint.htm>). It includes the thoughts of *BMJ* editor

CMAJ Online
<http://www.cma.ca/journals/cmaj>

Tony Delamothe, readers and authors. “Rights, wrongs, and journals in the age of cyberspace,” which is found in the Dec. 21–28 issue of *BMJ* and at <http://www.bmj.com/archive/7072fd2.htm>, presents LaPorte’s take on the issues, as well as responses from the editors of several major medical journals.

On the other side of the world, the *Medical Journal of Australia* is conducting a trial of “open peer review.” Once a research article has been accepted for publication in print in the *MJA*, it is published online at <http://www.library.usyd.edu.au/MJA/papers/papers.html>,

along with the peer reviewers’ comments. Readers are invited to review the articles and offer their comments, which may be electronically published with the articles, along with answers from the authors. The editors want to determine whether this process improves the articles and whether it has an effect on the quality of peer review.

At *CMAJ* we have taken a different first step into the preprint world. Since March 1996 we have published e-mailed letters to the editor about *CMAJ* articles in the online *CMAJ Readers’ Forum* (www.cma.ca/journals/cmaj/letonlin) before they appear in print. The object is to reduce the lag between publication and the ensuing discussion by making the entire process electronic. When a letter arrives by e-mail, it is given expedited handling but still undergoes careful review and editing. The author of the article is invited to respond via e-mail, and each letter is posted to Readers’ Forum and linked to the pertinent article and additional letters; print publication is often delayed until all letters and responses are in so readers can view the entire package at once.

The results? So far, not many of you are taking advantage of this much faster route to airing your concerns. Please tell us (pubs@cma.ca) why — and how you think medical journals can use the Net more effectively.

Highlights from CMA Online

To learn what Dr. Judith Kazimirski is doing on behalf of Canadian physicians, check out the online calendar of events “CMA President’s engagements on behalf of members” at http://www.cma.ca/canmed/president/events_e.htm (English) or [/events_f.htm](http://www.cma.ca/canmed/president/events_f.htm) (French).

Cool sites

<http://www.icondata.com/health/pedbase>

Dr. Alan Gandy (gandy@ATCON.COM) designed a pediatric database (PEDBASE) while completing his residency at the University of Western Ontario. He has consolidated information for more than 500 pediatric disorders that was gathered from at least 3 sources, including major textbooks and journal articles. The material is viewable on the Web, and instructions for downloading are clear. Gandy has begun updating the files and adding to them while working as a consultant pediatrician in Summerside, PEI.