

Summing up^{1,2}

Charles H Halsted, Editor-in-Chief

Effective 30 June 2007, I will relinquish my responsibilities as Editor-in-Chief of *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* (*AJCN*), after 10 full years that were preceded by another 1.5 years as Interim Editor. At the outset, I wish to extend my sincere appreciation to D'Ann Finley, Manuscripts Editor, who has sat across the table from me while assisting in all aspects of editing (including initially evaluating new submissions, assigning reviewers, reviewing their reviews, providing her own technical reviews, and critiquing the wisdom of my decisions) and without whom none of my work would have been truly effective. I wish also to recognize the constant availability of my close colleague Robert Rucker, who has been the *AJCN's* Senior Associate Editor through my entire tenure and has shared many of my editorial responsibilities during the past 3 years. In addition, I greatly appreciate the valued advice from other *AJCN* Associate Editors, including Richard Havel, Janet King, Robert Russell, Gary Gray, and Barry Shane; the hard work and special expertise of many Consulting Editors throughout the years; as well as a multitude of reviewers selected worldwide for their specialized expertise. We have been supported daily by Sharon Lovejoy and various other assistants, who sorted, filed, and directed an ever-increasing supply of new manuscript submissions before, during, and after our entry into electronic publishing. I also wish to recognize the personnel of the Bethesda production office, with whom we have interacted over the years, including Production Managers Lori Barber, Elizabeth Horowitz, and Darren Early; the various Executive Officers, who provided oversight to journal management; and the many Technical Editors who work diligently under constant deadlines to ensure the readability, grammatical accuracy, and formatting consistency of each final monthly issue of the *AJCN*.

During this transition, I would like to reflect on my original goals, how I think the *AJCN* has been transformed, special issues that we have dealt with, and the direction I hope the *AJCN* will head in the future. When I applied for the position of Editor-in-Chief in August 1996, my overall goal was for the *AJCN* to be the primary vehicle for advancing the significance of nutritional science to clinical medicine, while promoting the Journal as the repository for the best science in our field. I viewed the primary purpose of the *AJCN* as being a vehicle for original reports of significant scientific discoveries, stimulating reviews and controversies, and monthly editorials on selected articles in the larger perspective of the emerging field of clinical nutrition. The increasingly higher standards for manuscript acceptance and incorporation of new features over my tenure have been intended to enhance the visibility of the monthly publication while promoting the goals of the original founders of the *AJCN* in 1952, ie, to achieve the status of the most highly regarded journal of

clinical investigation (1) while ensuring that nutrition be regarded as "the cornerstone of preventive medicine, the handmaiden of curative disease, and the responsibility of every physician" (2). At the same time, the scope of the *AJCN* would be expanded to provide valuable new perspectives on nutritional bases of health and many diseases, international nutrition, and epidemiologic studies on the relation of diet to disease.

At the end of my tenure, I believe that the original goals of the *AJCN* have been thoroughly engaged and are in the process of being achieved. Both the visibility and the readership of the *AJCN* were greatly expanded by the addition to each issue of at least 2 editorials that focus on articles of potential interest, written by acknowledged experts in each specialized area, and by the inclusion of 1 or 2 review articles on topics of current interest. With the initiation of electronic publication in 1999, our worldwide readership expanded, and new submissions now originate about equally from the United States and from foreign countries. As shown in **Figure 1**, we started with 701 submissions in 1995 and experienced an 81% increase in the numbers of original articles submitted between 1995 and 2006. In the first quarter of 2007, we received an average of 118 new original submissions per month, which, if sustained, will translate to more than 1400 manuscripts submitted in the current calendar year. This increase in submissions has permitted us to become increasingly selective while lowering the acceptance rate of original submissions from 40% in 1996 to 28% at the end of my tenure. As shown in **Figure 2**, the reduced acceptance rate translated to an increase in the quality of published submissions; note the significant inverse correlation between annual acceptance rates and the impact factor of the *AJCN*. The impact factor (the number of citations of all original articles, editorials, letters, and reviews during the preceding 2 y divided by the total number of original research articles and reviews) has nearly doubled, from 3.327 in 1995 to 5.853 in 2005 (subsequent data pending), which places the *AJCN* in the forefront of all peer-reviewed nutrition journals and in the top one-half of all medical specialty journals.

Along the way, I have learned many lessons in editorship that go beyond the nuts and bolts of manuscript selection, peer review, and final decisions on acceptance or rejection. For example, early in my tenure I was presented with a mandate to publish a society position paper on the legitimacy of *trans* fatty acids that

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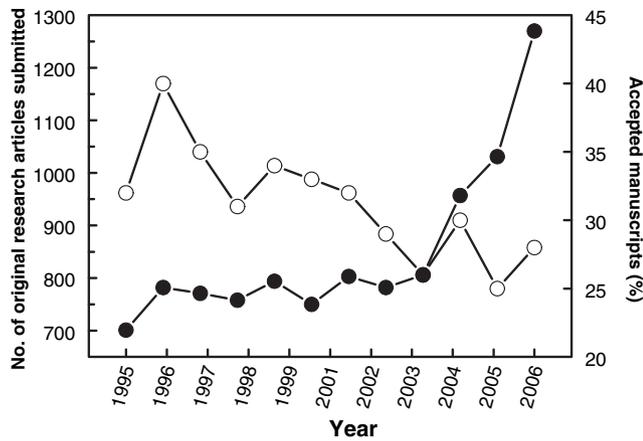


FIGURE 1. Number of original research articles submitted each year to the *AJCN* over the 11 y of my tenure (●) and the percentage of submitted original research articles accepted for publication (○).

had not been peer reviewed. This was a challenge to my editorial rights and responsibilities; therefore, I sought counsel from editors of several prominent medical journals and was directed to a clear statement of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors that reads as follows: “Editors must have full authority for determining the editorial content of the journal. This concept of editorial freedom should be resolutely defended by editors even to the extent of placing their positions at stake” (3). I was advised by my editor colleagues that editorial freedom is essential for sustaining the scientific integrity of the journal and that peer review is the only way to ensure the highest possible quality of all scientific papers and reviews, including societal position papers, which can only be improved in the process. My editorial position as the final arbiter of sufficient scientific quality for acceptance in the *AJCN* was continuously respected from then on, as is the case for all high-quality scientific journals.

Several years ago, the *AJCN* and other nonprofit scholarly journals were faced with the challenging new policy of free open electronic access of all scientific content to the scientific community and the public, first espoused by the founders of the Public Library of Science (PLOS) and then adopted by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) as a recommended course for all

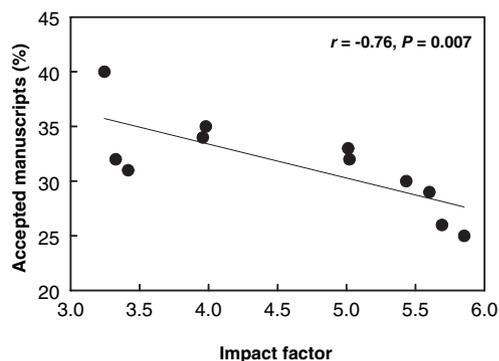


FIGURE 2. Relation between the percentage of original scientific articles accepted in each of the 11 y of my tenure and the impact factor of the *AJCN*. The impact factor represents the number of citations of all original articles, editorials, letters, and reviews divided by the total number of original research articles and reviews. The 2 factors are closely correlated.

of its funded principal investigators. In response, the *AJCN* subscribed to the Washington DC Principles for Free Access to Science, which state that “our mission is to maintain and enhance the independence, rigor, trust, and visibility that have established scholarly journals as reliable filters of information emanating from clinical and laboratory research” (4). We also expressed concern that open access would threaten *AJCN* copyright policies that protect against falsified use of data published in our journal, could threaten subscription income from libraries and individuals that largely support the *AJCN* and its parent society, and would lead to a system in which only well-financed authors could afford to publish either in the NIH’s PubMed Central or in PLoS journals. Furthermore, the *AJCN* already allowed instant free electronic access to all editorials and reviews, to all content for residents of low-income countries, and to all content for all readers 12 months after publication (5, 6).

In 2002, the *AJCN* adopted a code of conduct for authors that requires full disclosure of real or potential conflicts of financial or personal interest with the sponsor of each research project. While complying with the publications ethics of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (7), this policy ensures the scientific integrity of the *AJCN* by preventing a biased interpretation of results, especially in the field of nutrition, in which many corporate research sponsors have product marketing as their principal goal (8). In addition, we adopted rules that required each author to declare their contribution to the manuscript in question, under the overall policy that every author must have made substantive contributions to the research. Furthermore, we required that each reviewer recuse him- or herself from evaluating manuscripts from authors in the same institution, from present or recent collaborators, or from sponsors of organizations with which they had any financial interest.

In addition to continuing its upward trajectory of scientific excellence, the *AJCN* is likely to face many challenges and opportunities as it moves into its new editorial regime. Although the statement of editorial freedom has been incorporated into the bylaws of the American Society for Nutrition, it may need to be defended from time to time because the officers of the society change on a yearly basis, whereas the editor’s term lasts for at least 5 y. Editorial freedom is essential for unencumbered peer review, which, with the final decision of the Editor, is the only reliable method for determining the quality and acceptability of any written scientific material to be published in a journal. Societal ownership of copyright to all materials published in the *AJCN* is essential to protect against distortion of scientific discoveries and to protect the reputation of the *AJCN* as well as that of the authors. Adherence to our stated regulations on authorship responsibility for full disclosure of real or potential conflicts of interest is the only way to ensure the integrity of scientific discoveries published in the *AJCN*. Last, the *AJCN* and other nonprofit scientific journals and their sponsoring societies continue to be at risk of co-optation of copyright and first publication by open access according to governmental policies. Although a stalemate now exists in which fewer than 5% of NIH-funded investigators voluntarily opt to publish in PubMed Central, Bill S 2695—which was recently submitted in the US Senate—would, if enacted, require all grantees of federal agencies to submit their work online to PubMed Central within 6 months of



acceptance. Concern has been raised that switching from voluntary to mandatory compliance would obviate the copyright provisions of scientific journals and would probably remove the incentives for institutional and individual subscriptions that, in the case of the *AJCN*, support its continued viability as an independent journal of scientific inquiry (9).

After having served as the Editor-in-Chief of the *AJCN* for 10 years, I consider the peer-review process of manuscript review and final editorial selection to be the best available way to ensure the quality of all published scientific materials, even though the process is not at all democratic. Adherence to this process is bound to ensure the continued increasing excellence of the *AJCN*, and I am most proud to have made a contribution to this. 

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