

EDITORIAL

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: A CHANGE IN POLICY

Letters to The Editor continue to be a vital part of *The Journal's* interaction with its readers. This feature provides a forum for readers to comment on, criticize, or present additional data regarding published scientific articles, and it allows the authors of the articles to respond when questions are raised by the letter writer. Occasionally, the reader who browses the Letters to The Editor section will find letters that take him or her back to an article that he or she might have missed.

However, in its current form, the Letters to The Editor section has numerous disadvantages. In an effort to make the letters most meaningful to our readers, we have published each letter with the response of the authors of the original article. Because of the time needed to obtain this response, the letter and response have been published many months after the article to which they refer. They have been, therefore, temporally and spatially disconnected from the original article. Also, the process has not easily allowed further communications or ongoing dialogue about the subject at hand.

In contrast, the electronic Letters to The Editor feature on our web site, www.jbjs.org, allows for timely and connected communication. Electronic Letters to The Editor are reviewed by the editors and, if chosen for publication, they can be promptly edited and published electronically. Many times, the letter corroborates the evidence presented in the original article or provides alternative views, and these letters can be posted on our web site immediately. Alternatively, when a letter disputes the authors' findings or requests additional data or clarification, the corresponding author of the article to which the letter pertains is notified by e-mail and invited to respond. We then hold the letter until that response is available so that we can publish the letter and response together.

In the electronic format, all letters and responses pertaining to a published article are permanently linked to it and can be retrieved together. A reader can view all electronic Let-

ters to The Editor that have been published within the previous three months by clicking on Letters to The Editor on our web site's home page. This allows a rapid review of current controversies and offers an electronic forum to our readers to engage in a dynamic post-peer-review process.

As an increasing number of subscribers now view the web site on a regular basis and because of the advantages of the electronic format, we are implementing a new policy regarding Letters to The Editor, which will become effective immediately. First, all Letters to The Editor must be submitted electronically via the Letters to The Editor link on our web site. The author of a letter must fully complete the fields that require his or her identification and affiliation and must abide by the same disclosure rules that we require of authors of scientific articles. Letters should be succinct and make one or two major points. Their length, exclusive of references, must be limited to 325 words.

The editors will post all accepted letters, together with the responses by the authors of the original article when appropriate, on the web site after editing them for clarity and brevity. The editors will also select certain electronic letters and author responses to be published in the print version of *The Journal*.

We believe that this new policy will speed the process, make Letters to The Editor more relevant and contemporaneous with the articles that they address, and engage the readership in an ongoing dialogue about articles published in *The Journal* and their ultimate impact on patient care.

—Robert Poss, MD
Deputy Editor for Electronic Media

—James D. Heckman, MD
Editor-in-Chief