

## Critical letters about writing critical letters

Sir,

Dr Goodman's article on 'How to write a critical letter' (vol 62(7), 2001, p. 426), while interesting, does not, we fear, tell one how to write a critical letter. Letter writing may be an art, to be learnt from other inveterate letter writers, or it could be a self-selective occupation, attractive to those who get tired after  $n=1$ . Various other points arise:

A letter can be used to include further data on a subject that would not be printed, as there is a previous published paper on that subject. Britto et al (1995) published on intensive care transfers, and we published a letter backing up their data (Sharples et al, 1996). Other results may not bear out the findings of the original letter. Lewis (1996) was unable to confirm Best et al's (1996) excellent results on haemodiafiltration in children with meningitis.

Another example of this was when angioplasty was first described and the results for all-comers were rather poor. Wilmshurst (1987) pointed out that a preliminary study had six deaths, and yet when it was published (Sowton et al, 1986), there were none. The printed results were for first-time angioplasty, explained Timmis and Sowton (1987), which were much better and these were the ones printed. This draws a fine line between data pruning and selection of a subset. A letter that alleges research fraud is a difficult manoeuvre and should only be carried out by the experienced operators.

Passing on critical unpublished letters to authors is fraught with problems. The obvious consequence is that new ideas from the critical letter writer are transmitted to the authors, who may then pass these ideas off as their own.

As a generalization, Americans find critical letters hard to take. The most abusive replies we have received have been unprinted letters passed on to

American authors. Not for them, stealing the idea – if the idea is not theirs, it must be rubbish. Our particular feeling is that they look on a critical letter as trying to limit their freedom of speech. When the *New England Journal of Medicine* got into difficulties with editorialists plugging their own products, it was felt the pluggers should be given a right of reply (Manson and Faich, 1996), in which they showed no contrition about what they had done. This brought the reputation of *New England Journal of Medicine* editorials to a uniquely low point but was of no consequence to them. Some even said they would do it again.

We agree with Goodman in that critical letter writers have an important function in the peer group review of already edited letters. When Goodman suggests that letters are a way of gaining an easy publication, we fear he may be guilty of that offence himself. We certainly are.

### S Wiggins/OR Dearlove

*Specialist Registrar in Anaesthetics/  
Consultant Anaesthetist  
Department of Paediatric Anaesthesia  
Royal Manchester Children's Hospital  
Pendlebury  
Manchester M27 4HA*

Best C, Walsh J, Sinclair J, Beattie J (1996) Early haemo-dia-filtration in meningococcal septicaemia. *Lancet* **347**: 202

Britto J, Nadel S, Maconochie S, Levin M, Habibi P (1995) Morbidity and severity of illness during inter-hospital transfer: impact of a specialised paediatric referral team. *Br Med J* **311**: 86–9

Lewis MA (1996) Early haemo-dia-filtration in meningococcal septicaemia. *Lancet* **347**: 612–3

Manson JE, Faich GA (1996) Editorials respond. *N Engl J Med* **335**: 1064–5

Sharples A, O'Neill M, Dearlove O (1996) Impact of a specialised paediatric referral team: children are still transferred by non specialist teams. *Br Med J* **312**: 120–1

Sowton E, Timmis AD, Crick JC, Griffin B, Yates AK, Deverall P (1986) Early results after percutaneous transluminal coronary angioplasty in 400 patients. *Br Heart J* **56**: 115–20

Timmis AD, Sowton E (1987) Early results after percutaneous transluminal coronary angioplasty in 400 patients. *Br Heart J* **57**: 493

Wilmshurst P (1987) Early results after percutaneous transluminal coronary angioplasty in 400 patients. *Br Heart J* **57**: 493

Sir,

I am not sure what points Wiggins and Dearlove are making. I did not suggest that there are not some unpleasant people around. I had mentioned the likelihood of abuse. Wiggins and Dearlove mention some specific incidents of what I regard, frankly, as fraud. They are right to do so, but my remit was how to write a letter, not to document instances of when letters have failed to achieve anything. There are many examples of primary research not being corrected either as a result of vested interests or just plain obstinacy.

I do not understand their conclusion that they agree with me that 'critical letter writers have an important function in the peer group review of already edited letters'. That is not what I wrote; I regard the main purpose of critical letters as being to correct original articles, even if that does not always happen.

Nor did I suggest that letters are a way of gaining an easy publication. They certainly require less effort than writing a full paper, but, as I know, there is no guarantee of publication.

### Neville W Goodman

*Consultant Anaesthetist  
Southmead Hospital  
Bristol BS10 5NB*

## Correspondence

If you would like to comment on any articles published in *Hospital Medicine*, or any issues relevant to our readers, please write in no more than 250 words to:

Dr Jack Tinker  
Editor-in-Chief, *Hospital Medicine*  
c/o Yvonne Perks  
1 Wimpole Street  
London W1G 0AE