An audit of the *BMJ*'s correspondence columns

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Abstract

Objective—To see whether some sections of the *BMJ* attract more comment than others, whether letters submitted in response to different sections of the journal are rejected at different rates, and whether the balance between letters that agree and disagree with articles in the published correspondence reflects that in submitted letters.

Design—Retrospective audit of letters submitted for publication in the correspondence columns of the *BMJ* in response to articles published between 1 January and 21 May 1989.

Subjects—A total of 1319 letters received by the journal, 974 submitted in response to the 1501 published articles and a further 345 raising new issues.

Main outcome measures—The total numbers of letters submitted in response to the four main sections of the journal—editorials, news, papers, and middles—and the numbers published. Submitted and published letters were analysed according to whether they agreed or disagreed with articles.

Results—The overall rejection rate was 63% (831/1319), but among letters relating to articles it was 56% (543/974). Editorials and middles attracted proportionately more letters than papers, but letters relating to papers had a lower rejection rate (43% *v* 57% for editorials and 43% *v* 66% for middles). For all sections more letters disagreed than agreed, but a higher proportion of letters in response to editorials and middles disagreed than those submitted in response to papers (64% and 72% *v* 53%). Among the published letters, however, broadly equal numbers of letters agreed and disagreed with articles, irrespective of section.

Conclusion—Those sections of the journal that aim at stimulating debate succeeded in attracting the most comment. The relative importance of original scientific research papers was reflected by the priority given to letters submitted in response to papers, and the final correspondence column was a balanced platform of debate despite an unequal submitted response in terms of letters that agreed and disagreed with different sections of the journal.

Introduction

One of the most important functions of a general medical journal is to publish important, original research papers of high scientific quality that are appropriate for a general readership. There is, however, more to a general medical journal than the scientific papers. The *BMJ* has four main sections—editorials, news, papers, and middles. Broadly, editorials aim at updating the reader on important topics; news items at keeping the reader informed of events in the medical world; and middle articles at educating the general reader (the ABC and other series, How To Do It, and review articles) and stimulating debate (for debate, controversies in therapeutics). The correspondence column provides a platform for readers' comments.

An unpublished survey of letters published in the *BMJ* carried out by one of us (PCA) found that editorials were more frequently commented on in the

Letters to the editor: what the *BMJ* wants

- Letters should almost always relate to matters already published in the journal. Letters that are not on scientific subjects but relate to public policy may be considered "out of the blue"
- They should relate to articles published within the past six weeks
- They should contain data, genuine new points, or convincing arguments and be neither obscene nor libellous
- They should be interesting

correspondence columns of the journal than scientific papers. This survey looked at letters published between 1 January and 30 June 1988. After this period the layout of the journal changed to the present format.

Taking PCA's findings as a starting point, but using a different set of data, RJB carried out an audit of the correspondence column of the *BMJ*, looking at both the submitted letters and those that were published.

The audit had three aims: firstly, to see whether some sections of the journal attracted more comment than others; secondly, to see whether letters submitted in response to different sections of the journal were rejected at different rates; and, lastly, to see whether the balance between published letters agreeing and disagreeing with articles reflected that in the submitted letters.

Methods

The *BMJ*'s criteria for selecting letters are outlined in the box. In particular, the journal will consider letters on scientific topics only if they relate to issues raised in the *BMJ* recently (within the past six weeks), although letters that raise issues of public policy may be considered "out of the blue."

The audit was carried out during RJB's eight week elective at the *BMJ*. The journal staff had collected copies of all letters to the editor received from 1 January to 30 June 1989, but because of the journal's policy RJB read only those that related to items published in the journal from 1 January to 21 May or those that were candidates for unrelated public policy letters received from 1 January to 21 May. She also excluded letters received after six weeks from publication of the article on which they were commenting.

The letters were classified according to what type of article in the *BMJ* they were commenting on (if any) and whether they broadly agreed or disagreed with it (or were neutral). Articles were categorised as editorials, news, papers, middles, or others (which included all remaining sections of the journal). The χ^2 test was used to compare the numbers of letters accepted and rejected in response to each section and the numbers of both accepted and rejected letters that agreed or disagreed with articles.

Results

The *BMJ* published 1501 articles or items between 1 January and 21 May 1990 and received 974 letters in

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response to them (table I). A further 345 letters were received between 1 January and 21 May that did not relate to matters published in the journal, making a total of 1319 letters analysed. Overall 488 of these letters were accepted and 831 (63%) rejected: of the letters that related to papers 431 were accepted and 543 (56%) rejected, while only 57 of the unrelated letters were accepted and 288 rejected (83%).

Editorials and middles prompted the greatest response (χ^2 732.69, $df=4$, $p<0.001$), but letters relating to papers were more likely to be accepted (rejection rate 43% *v* 57% for editorials, $p<0.01$; and *v* 66% for middles, $p<0.001$; table 1). Provocative articles succeeded in attracting comment—for example, five For Debate articles attracted 77 letters—although most of these were rejected.

Of the 974 letters submitted in response to articles 274 (28%) agreed with the article, 431 (44%) disagreed, and 269 (28%) neither agreed nor disagreed. The relation between agreement and disagreement in the submitted letters was not reflected among the published letters. Although overall the balance was similar in published letters to that in submitted letters (table II), the individual sections showed different patterns of agreement/disagreement (table III). Although for all sections more letters disagreed than agreed, a higher proportion of the letters submitted in response to editorials and middles disagreed than those

submitted in response to papers (64% and 72% *v* 53%, $p<0.05$ and $p<0.001$ respectively). Among letters that disagreed those submitted in response to editorials and middles were rejected more often than those submitted in response to papers ($p<0.001$). Among the letters that agreed with editorials, news items, papers, and middles there were no significant differences between the number of accepted and rejected letters. Letters that agreed with other items were, however, rejected significantly more often.

Looking at the letters that were published (table I) showed that the largest number of letters published related to papers. Among published letters there were no significant differences between the numbers of letters that agreed and disagreed with editorials, news items, papers and middles (table III). A significantly higher proportion of letters commenting on other items in the journal disagreed with them, however (79%, 22/28; $p<0.05$).

Discussion

Judged by the numbers of letters submitted, editorials and middles attracted significantly more comment from *BMJ* readers than research papers. In the published columns, however, research papers were discussed more often than editorials and middles. At 43% the rejection rate for letters about research papers was significantly lower than the rejection rate for letters about editorials (57%) and middles (66%). The data from this audit suggest that the editors of the *BMJ* favour the publication of letters about research papers. One reason for this is that they see the correspondence columns as a platform for debate where readers can put forward new data and alternative lines of argument in response to published work. In this way published research is tested against the reader as well as the editors, referees, and hanging committees who accepted the paper for publication. About 85% of research papers submitted are rejected.

The correspondence columns contained broadly equal numbers of letters agreeing and disagreeing with articles from the four main sections of the journal. Thus they did not reflect the submitted correspondence, particularly on editorials and middles, where a much higher proportion of the submitted correspondence disagreed with articles. It could therefore be argued that the editors of the *BMJ* are suppressing readers' comments, particularly adverse ones. Having read the 974 letters submitted in response to articles, RJB considered that readers' comments were well represented in a balanced platform of debate. Rejected letters either did not contain new data, genuine new points, or convincing arguments, were obscene or libellous, or repeated points already made in letters accepted for publication. Moreover, letters about research papers were, in general, of a higher quality than those about editorials and middles.

About two thirds of letters responding to other items discussed Personal Views, new correspondence, and Opinions. There was a tendency to reject letters that agreed with these articles. Because of this more of the published letters disagreed with the article than agreed. The main reason for this is probably that letters that disagree with personal opinions are of more interest than those that agree with and repeat them.

The data from this audit provide a description of editorial policy (in relation to the correspondence column) now and a baseline for judging the effect of any future changes.

We thank Jane Smith for her help in preparing this paper, and the editor of the *British Medical Journal* for allowing RJB to read and analyse the letters submitted for publication in the correspondence columns of the journal.

TABLE 1—Number of letters submitted in response to published articles according to section of journal and numbers rejected and published

	No of articles published	No of letters submitted	Ratio letters:articles	No (%) of letters rejected	No of letters published
Editorials	117	292	2.5	165 (57)	127
News	204	58	0.3	35 (60)	23
Papers	187	292	1.6	126 (43)	166
Papers	83	154	1.9	55	
Short Reports	91	125	1.4	66	
Practice Observed	13	13	1.0	5	
Middles*	93	205	2.2	136 (66)	69
For Debate	5	77	15.4	63	
How To Do It	9	39	4.3	28	
Controversies	3	11	3.7	5	
Reviews	41	55	1.3	30	
Series	14	10	0.7	4	
ABCs	16	10	0.6	6	
Others*	913	127	0.14	81 (64)	46
Personal View	26	39	1.5	30	
Correspondence†	57	34	0.6	19	
Opinion	25	11	0.4	8	
Minerva	239	21	0.1	13	
BMA Affairs	70	6	0.1	2	
Total	1501	974	1.54	543 (56)	431

*Only those subcategories receiving more than five letters have been listed.

†"New" correspondence.

TABLE II—Overall agreement and disagreement among 974 letters submitted in response to articles and among those published. Results are numbers (percentages)

	No of letters submitted	No of letters published	% Published
Agreed	274 (28)	134 (31)	49
Disagreed	431 (44)	167 (39)	39
Neutral	269 (28)	130 (30)	48
Total	974 (100)	431 (100)	44

TABLE III—Numbers of letters submitted and published in response to sections of the *BMJ* according to their agreement or disagreement with the article. Figures in parentheses are percentages

	Agreed			Disagreed			Total		
	Submitted	Rejected	Published	Submitted	Rejected	Published	Submitted	Rejected	Published
Editorials	65	29 (45)	36	115	75 (65)	40	180	104	76
News	16	9 (56)	7	19	12 (63)	7	35	21	14
Papers	108	46 (43)	62	122	53 (43)	69	230	99	131
Middles	49	26 (53)	23	124	95 (77)	29	173	121	52
Other	36	30 (83)	6	51	29 (57)	22	87	59	28
Total	274	140 (51)	134	431	264 (61)	167	705	404 (57)	301