

My 21 years with the *Journal of Psychiatry and Neuroscience*, with observations on editors, editorial boards, authors and reviewers

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Introduction: kudos to Simon Young

This year marks the twenty-first anniversary of the founding of the *Journal of Psychiatry and Neuroscience (JPN)*. It also marks the twenty-first year of service to the journal for Simon Young, who has been editor-in-chief for the last 11 years (either alone or together with coeditors-in-chief Russell Joffe, Nicholas Coupland or me) and associate editor before that. After years of commitment, Simon stepped down from his official editorial duties with the journal at the end of June. On behalf of the journal and the scientific community, I would like to express our deep appreciation for his extraordinary contribution and dedication.

Under Simon's guidance as editor-in-chief, the impact factor of the journal has consistently increased, with the current 5-year impact factor at 4.41. Full article downloads had reached about 70 000 per month, at last check, and are also consistently rising. There is no doubt that Simon's contribution has been a highly significant factor in the success, high quality and character of the journal. His resolve to concentrate the journal on studies that contribute to understanding brain mechanisms responsible for mental disorders and their treatments has helped to define *JPN* as a focused journal with a clear vision. Working with Simon on the journal, it is apparent that one of his main guiding principles with respect to editorship is the quest for knowledge through scientific excellence (clichéd as this may read). To this end, he brought to the job an insistent striving for intellectual integrity and objective fairness. He has worked tirelessly over the years to obtain high-quality, appropriate reviews for papers and has contributed his own considerable critical observations, all while attempting to reduce turnaround time by minimizing the time papers spend on the editor's desk. He has emphasized construct-

ive and respectful interaction with authors, with all decisions, including rejection of a paper, meriting a thoughtful and constructive explanation. He has been at the forefront of innovations that improved our critical ability to judge articles, such as introducing formal statistical review of articles by associate editors and the mandatory inclusion of a limitations section in papers.

Another idea that Simon has been passionate about is maintaining *JPN* as an open-access journal so that its contents can be freely available to all. He has assiduously run after our busy clinical colleagues to maintain submissions to the "Psychopharmacology for the Clinician" columns, in part motivated by the knowledge that these columns could provide state-of-the-art therapeutic advice gratis to practitioners in geographic locations with limited financial resources. Issues of ethics related both to the conducting of scientific experiments with human participants and the publishing of findings have also been at the forefront of Simon's editorial perspective. Over the years, the journal has also been enriched by many of Simon's thought-provoking editorials ranging from his thoughts on how climate change should affect scientific meetings to how one can increase serotonin in the human brain without drugs (still one of *JPN*'s most frequently downloaded articles). Simon has truly gone the extra mile for the journal for 21 years, driving in rain, shine or snow from Montréal to Ottawa for bimonthly editorial board meetings, rather than teleconferencing, to interact personally with the editorial board, the publishers and editorial staff.

Simon's editorial sojourn with *JPN* has been accomplished with conviction, hard work and collegiality. We applaud and thank you, Simon.

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This is my thirty-first editorial for *JPN* and marks my retirement at the end of June after 21 years on the editorial board and 11 years as coeditor-in-chief. On this occasion I want to discuss what I see as the strengths of the journal and describe some of my experiences and insights about the publication process.

What makes *JPN* distinct?

One distinction that I am proud of is that *JPN* has the highest impact factor of any open-access journal in Journal Citation Reports lists for both psychiatry and neuroscience. Furthermore, it is one of the few open-access journals with no publication charges (manuscript processing fees or open-access fees). I am strongly in favour of open access for several reasons. First, university and hospital libraries pay large fees to give researchers access to online journals. Free access to some journals frees up funds for other purposes. Second, open access allows anyone, even in the world's poorest countries, to access the latest research. Whereas some subscription-based publishers do allow, in some circumstances, free online access to researchers in poor countries, the recent withdrawal of free access in Bangladesh to some of the top journals highlights problematic aspects of this program.¹ As stated in a recent essay, "Unequal access to and distribution of public knowledge is governed by Northern standards and is increasingly inappropriate."² Third, there is a substantial interest in the latest research from nonresearchers that is fed by open-access journals. I came to realize the extent of this interest recently when I discovered that an editorial I wrote for *JPN* in 2007, "How to increase serotonin in the human brain without drugs,"³ which to date has received 5 citations, was viewed online more than 350 000 times in the past 12 months.

Unfortunately, open access has not been embraced fully by the research community. A recent survey of 50 000 researchers found that only about half had ever published in an open-access journal.⁴ The main reasons given for not publishing in open-access journals were publication charges and a lack of high-quality options. As *JPN* does not have publication charges, the main source of money used to publish *JPN* is from print advertising. Whereas this is not an ideal solution, the publisher takes precautions, which I have discussed previously,⁵ to ensure that the advertising does not influence the content of the journal.

The relative lack of high-quality open-access journals is certainly a problem. In the neurosciences and psychiatry, most open-access journals, unlike *JPN*, have low impact factors, giving researchers little choice if they support open-access publishing. A disturbing trend in open-access publishing is the proliferation of journals published by for-profit publishers, some of whom have doubtful quality control. A recent study investigated several hundred journals produced by 9 publishers.⁶ Some of the publishers are described as "predatory," and the article includes comments on specific publishers, such as "The site is a dumping ground for articles rejected elsewhere," and "How can you publish 76 science titles and boast a 2–3 week turnaround time for peer review?" Fortunately there are both nonprofit publishers, such as the

Public Library of Science (PLOS), and for-profit publishers, such as BioMedCentral, that produce high-quality open-access journals, and I anticipate that publishing papers in such journals will steadily become more popular with researchers.

The second area in which I hope *JPN* differs from many other journals is in the quality of articles. An increasing area of literature, which not enough researchers are aware of, deals with important problems in research literature. Among the more prominent articles in this genre are those of Altman,⁷ who pointed out that research papers often contain methodologic errors, report results selectively and draw unjustified conclusions, and of Ioannidis,⁸ who discussed "why most published research findings are false." Important errors in the literature include those in both statistics⁷ and bioanalytical methodology.⁹ *JPN* uses a number of strategies to minimize the number of errors in published manuscripts. The obvious way to try and eliminate statistical errors is to have a statistician review manuscripts, and *JPN* has 2 statisticians on the editorial board for this purpose. I cannot recall a single manuscript where no statistical issue was raised with the authors. Often the issues were minor, but in a significant percentage they were major errors. A related issue is the interpretation of statistical analyses. The most egregious is assuming that a lack of difference between groups at $p < 0.05$ means that there is no difference between the groups. Nonetheless, this is a familiar problem with manuscripts. Requests to the authors to determine the power of the study to detect a difference usually results in no further communication from the authors, a tacit admission that the study was underpowered to state that the groups were similar. Another common error of interpretation is to assume that a correlation implies something about cause and effect. Because authors often try to put the best possible light on their study, *JPN* requires a section on limitations in the abstract and discussion. A complete description of all quality-control checks that the editors perform on each manuscript would make for dull reading, and having made my point I will leave it at that. The points raised may seem obvious and likely to preoccupy most journal editors, but unfortunately this does not seem to be so. For example, as far as I am aware, not many other journals have routine statistical review or demand the inclusion of limitations in the abstracts and discussions of papers.

I have been asked on occasion what has contributed to the increasing success of *JPN*. While I do not know, I would like to think the answer is the emphasis the journal puts on the quality of the methodology and the interpretation of the results in the papers we publish.

So you want to be an editor?

I never wanted to be a journal editor, but how I got into that position might provide some insight about how to get there if that is your ambition. I was invited by Yvon Lapierre to join the editorial board in 1990 when the journal was in its planning stages. Yvon wanted to start a new journal in response to the proliferation at that time of journals with a focused and narrow outlook. The objective of *JPN* was to provide a forum for a more integrative view of biological psychiatry, as stated

in the editorial in the inaugural issue.¹⁰ Yvon had been the first president of the Canadian College of Neuropsychopharmacology (CCNP), and at that time I was the CCNP treasurer and so was visible at CCNP meetings, which probably had something to do with his choice. I had no desire to become involved and only said yes because of my great respect for Yvon. Secretly, I thought the journal would probably fold fairly quickly, so I would not have to do too much, but I underestimated Yvon. The journal progressed and I became emotionally involved with it. My commitment to the journal obviously played a role in my selection as coeditor-in-chief when Yvon retired. So if you want to be an editor, you have to have some visibility with those involved in running a journal, and you need to show commitment to the journal when you become a member of the editorial board.

If you want to become involved with a journal, you need to distinguish between bodies that are often little more than a collection of prestigious names that have titles like “editorial advisory board” and the bodies that have responsibilities and are involved in setting policies. At *JPN* the latter is the editorial board, but the extent to which a body with that name is involved in running a journal varies. I do not know how other journals select people for editorial boards, but at *JPN* sending your curriculum vitae (CV) to the editor and asking to be appointed is not effective. In response to a request to review a manuscript, one high-profile researcher asked for an appointment to the editorial board in return for the review. Given that the researcher’s CV listed membership in more than 50 editorial boards, perhaps this technique was successful with some journals.

To be an effective editor, you need experience in reviewing. I learned a lot during 12 years participating in grant committees and 10 years chairing a research ethics board. I still associate various research design issues and problems in manuscripts that I identify with some of the committee members from whom I learned about the intricacies of those issues. Of course, if you want to be an editor you should accept invitations to review manuscripts. Most journals send reviewers the final decision with the reports of the other reviewers. I always compared my own review with those of the other reviewers to see what issues I might have missed, how to phrase concerns effectively and to identify what I did well and what I did badly. You should also analyze what you feel are good and bad points about the editor’s responses to your own manuscript submissions. The response that has annoyed me most over the years is rejecting a paper for reasons that are all correctable, and I try to avoid doing this as an editor.

Interactions with the editorial board

For me, meetings of the editorial board (6 times a year) are one of the pleasures of being an editor, as they involve discussions of interesting issues of policy and science with a group of smart and congenial colleagues who have diverse and interesting opinions. Numerous issues need discussion; recent ones include whether word limits for manuscripts are a good idea, whether to keep the category “Brief Reports,” standards for gene nomenclature, guidelines for the

review of manuscripts submitted by members of the editorial board and the appropriate responses to different degrees of plagiarism.

The submission of manuscripts by editors or members of the editorial board provides an interesting test of collegiality. I have heard critical and probably unfair comments about a couple of other journals to which the editors frequently contribute research papers. An editor should be able to support her or his own journal by submitting manuscripts, so I submit some to *JPN*, but not too many. I trust that the editorial board member in charge of the review of one of my manuscripts treats it like any other manuscript. However, this may be difficult with friends and close colleagues, and I hope that the tendency is to err on the side of being more strict than usual. I have had an editorial and a research manuscript rejected by *JPN*. My reaction is the same as with any other rejected manuscript: a brief episode of irritation that the editors and reviewers did not understand it before I submit it elsewhere. I never discuss my own submissions with other members of the editorial board, nor do I discuss any manuscripts that they submit when I handle the review.

Assessing manuscripts

My main concern in reviewing manuscripts is to minimize the number of mistakes I make. Being somewhat temperamentally anxious helps, as I tend to ruminate before rejecting manuscripts. On the bulletin board above my desk I keep a copy of the letter sent by *Nature* to Hans Krebs in 1937 rejecting the manuscript describing the Krebs cycle,¹¹ as a reminder to make every effort to try and understand what significance a manuscript could have.

The most difficult decisions to make and accurately justify to authors, are those based on the degree of interest in the article. As *JPN* can accept only a small percentage of the manuscripts submitted, we have to make judgments that compare manuscripts in very different fields of research. Surprisingly, given the subjective nature of such decisions, consultations between the coeditors-in-chief about specific manuscripts rarely lead to divergent opinions, and appeals against rejection, which are considered by a second member of the editorial board, result in a reversal of the decision in only a minority of cases.

When making decisions about the priority of different manuscripts, I have to take into account my particular prejudices and balance them against what is currently state-of-the-art in biological psychiatric research. Personally, I find studies on brain structure and function less interesting than those on molecular or metabolic topics as I believe the latter will lead more quickly (or less slowly) to improvements in treatment. However, as shown by the contents page of any *JPN* issue, I accept the broad consensus among researchers on the importance of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and functional MRI (fMRI) studies. My interests are also shaped by the way my own research has developed and my personal experience with psychiatric disorders. My sister had multiple sclerosis and committed suicide when lesions in her brain markedly altered her mood and cognition, and one of

my brothers committed suicide after a year of depression that never responded adequately to treatment. Both suicides were devastating personally, and papers and manuscripts on depression and suicide grab my attention easily. While my family background intensifies my interest in helping to improve the treatment of psychiatric disorders, the emotion based on personal experience does not seem to intrude on the intellectual judgment of a manuscript. But perhaps that opinion reflects one of my own self-serving biases, as I know that biases pervade every step of manuscript writing and reviewing.⁵

In addition to my attempts to leave aside my own prejudices when assessing a manuscript, I also try not to be influenced by the style of writing. For example, some authors write in a particularly grandiose style, but this is unrelated to the quality of the research and can be corrected, even if it does take a lot of effort from the editor. Manuscripts written by authors whose mother tongue is not English may be more difficult to understand, but thankfully *JPN* has had a series of very capable copyeditors to assist these authors express themselves more clearly. In addition, the copyeditors try to eliminate jargon in all articles. On the other hand, lapses in logic when writing, the lack of a clear statement in the manuscript of what was actually done and even contradictions in the manuscript (for example the numbers not adding up) are, I think, reasonable reasons to be suspicious. Anyone who cannot think clearly or does not pay attention to detail when writing up a study may not have been thinking clearly or paying attention to detail when designing or performing that study.

Interactions with authors

Most authors are very polite and understanding if the decision on their manuscript is explained properly. Occasionally authors whose manuscripts are rejected thank me for the constructive comments in the rejection letter. Anger is very rare. On one memorable occasion, I was approached at a meeting by a researcher whose manuscript had been rejected and was subjected to 15 minutes of abuse that included the assertion that I, and indeed the whole editorial board, was incompetent. I kept my comments to the occasional correction of facts and was rewarded by a handshake before the researcher left. The only other marked adverse reaction was from an author caught out in a serious matter of misconduct who not only vehemently denied the conclusive evidence but threatened legal action in very abusive terms. Of course nothing came of this.

Like most journals, *JPN* asks authors to suggest potential reviewers for the manuscripts they submit. In my experience, less than half the suggestions are useful, and they are sometimes totally inappropriate. For example, authors of a study on an animal model may suggest a clinician who has never done animal work but does clinical research on the syndrome the animal is modelling. Authors of an fMRI study may suggest a neuropsychology researcher with no experience in brain scanning. Even worse, a small number of researchers suggest a reviewer with only a couple of publications. I am

uncertain whether such behaviour indicates lack of thought on the part of authors, a lack of understanding of what peer review is about or a misguided attempt to obtain an easy review based on the assumption that the editor would not check the credentials of the reviewers suggested.

The occasions when I feel I cannot write to authors what I actually think are rare, but sometimes I cannot stop myself from composing comments I would have liked to send: "The next time you submit, you might want to change the letter accompanying the manuscript so that it is addressed to the journal you are sending it to, not the journal that obviously has just rejected it," or "On reading your manuscript I realize I should have been more explicit when I said I would love for you to submit a paper — I meant one of your good ones."

Manuscript reviewers

Reviewers exhibit both the best and sometimes the worst of behaviours. I greatly admire those reviewers who regularly provide thoughtful and constructive reviews on time, even though such work does little to advance their own careers. They are a wonderful example of collegiality in the research community. But to my dismay, there are excellent and thoughtful researchers who provide trivial reviews, including a couple who do little more than correct punctuation and grammar (a role performed more appropriately by the *JPN* copyeditor). Most disappointing are instances when researchers accept to review a manuscript but never provide their reviews in spite of a number of reminders, thereby unnecessarily delaying the review process. Thankfully, I recall only 1 occasion when I thought reviewers might be attempting to impede someone they saw as a competitor.

The publisher

JPN has the good fortune to be published by the Canadian Medical Association (CMA). CMA Publications is a not-for-profit publisher that produces a number of open-access journals. For me they are the ideal publisher because they support open access, they are willing to implement suggestions from the editorial board if they are financially feasible, they allow the editors to concentrate on the content of the journal without having to worry about the journal budget, and because everyone there seems to be smart, capable, hard-working and pleasant to deal with. I would like to thank especially Glenda Proctor who has looked after *JPN* in a number of positions during her ascent to director and publisher of CMA Publications; Melanie Slavitch, the editorial coordinator; and Wendy Carroll, the managing editor. The excellent people who have filled those positions previously are too numerous to mention, but I am grateful to them all.

The future

I have always believed that the best time to leave any position is when the ideal successors are ready to take over, so I am very happy to leave *JPN* with Patricia Boksa and Ridha Joobar working as coeditors-in-chief.

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