

# Closing the loop with electronic publishing

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Upon receipt of a new manuscript from a Norwegian colleague, I was challenged to reduce the time from submission to publication. Within a week of its arrival, the paper was photocopied and mailed to two reviewers. One reviewer submitted his comments 3 weeks later; the other requested an extension. The extension was granted, but we mailed the manuscript to a third reviewer, just in case. It took about 8 weeks—4 weeks longer than we like—but we eventually were able to fax all three reviews to the author. Four days later, we received his faxed revisions! I reviewed the revisions, edited the manuscript, and accepted the paper for publication. Faxing the reviews and revisions made up for some of the delay during the review process and I was able to accept the revised manuscript 12 weeks after submission of the original.

But I didn't say the paper was actually published, did I? Space in the next two issues was already gone and the third was filling up fast.

What is missing from this scenario to fulfill the high expectations of our author, not to mention the clinicians awaiting these new findings?

Electronic publishing is the missing link. When available to this journal, our revised and accepted paper could be published electronically a good 6 to 8 months before becoming hardcopy. But speeding up the process is only the first of many advantages that hold remarkable promise with the coming use of this tech-

nology, according to Horace F. Judson<sup>1</sup> of Stanford University. He recently participated in the Second International Congress on Peer Review in Biomedical Publication, and made the following observations.

First, electronic publishing offers the only possible remedy to the problem of sorting out the articles that are directly relevant to an individual's work. Many journals will continue to function best in their present form—being printed on paper—but any journal should be available for electronic browsing and searching. All of the raw data including notes and personal correspondence could be made available electronically, and then the paper could be condensed for eventual publication in print.

In comments in *The Scientist*, Lederberg<sup>2</sup> calls for a dialogue between readers, journals, and authors prior to printed publication. He sees this as the greatest long-term gain for electronic publishing. You, the reader, will be able to scan not just the compressed references to other articles, but if you wish, will be able to demand the referees' reports, and perhaps other related information. Electronic publication will invite open criticism, suggestions, rebuttals; and the paper will actually go through revisions on the screen, with comments and old versions retained for reference.

"I go into this detail about the potential of electronic publication because we must recog-

Continued on page 324

## Letters

### Dental and facial asymmetries

I read with interest the review by Samir Bishara, Paul Burkey and John Kharouf on "Dental and facial asymmetries: a review" (*Angle Orthod* 1994;64(2)89-98). While the review is extensive, it doesn't mention one fact that, although quite obvious, I have rarely heard mentioned. That is: children and adults almost always eat on the side to which the

mandible has deviated. I know of no research that justifies this statement but it is such a constant finding that it really does not need confirmation.

I thought your readers might be interested in this observation, although I am sure many would have already appreciated it.

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### Editorial

continued from page 323

nize how revolutionary it really is," adds Judson. "We are not talking about the substitution of one medium for another, of the replacement of the printed page by the screen, with everything else...including editing, refereeing, and readers' correspondence...to go on as before." In his address to 275 editors and researchers from 20 countries, Judson emphasized that this transformation will open up the processes by which scientists judge each other's work, making them less anonymous, rigid, and subject to abuse and more thorough, responsible, and accountable.

I believe this eventual development will encourage our readers to take a more active part in the intellectual assessment of published research. This will lead to a form of publication that will be a continuing open dialogue and collaboration among contributing scientists, editors, expert commentators, and readers. An editor's dream...and to think that it will happen within the next decade. Then I will be able to assure my Norwegian colleague that his research will be published and open to worldwide scientific scrutiny within a few weeks of submission rather than a few months.

### References

1. Judson, Horace F. Structural transformations of the sciences and the end of peer review. *JAMA*. 1994;272:92-94.
2. Lederberg, J. Communication as the root of scientific progress. *Scientist* 1993;7:10-11,14.