

Fare well, *Human Reproduction*

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The end of my 6-year term as the Editor-in-Chief (EIC) of *Human Reproduction* (HR) gives me an opportunity to reflect on many issues.

The history of *Human Reproduction*

Bob Edwards and Jean Cohen, the 'Founding Fathers' of the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology (ESHRE), wanted to create a journal for their newly founded scientific society on a par with Fertility and Sterility, the well-established journal of the American Fertility Society (now ASRM). So *Human Reproduction* (HR) started in 1986 with Bob Edwards, the first editor. He was instrumental in giving HR a prominent place as a scientific journal in the subspecialty categories Obstetrics and Gynecology and Reproductive Biology. By 2000, there was not just HR; *Human Reproduction Update* (HRU) and *Molecular Human Reproduction* (MHR) had also been launched. From 2001, each of the three ESHRE journals had its own editor.

During his term as the EIC of HR (2001–2006), David Barlow consolidated the position as a leading journal in the field. At the end of his term, the HR Editorial Team expanded at the request of the Society's Executive Committee by the appointment of three Deputy Editors (John Collins, Giorgio Crosignani and myself). I became Deputy Editor at the same time as I became professor emeritus at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, which meant that I could devote considerable time to the Journal. I was appointed the EIC of HR in 2007.

Editors' team of the ESHRE journals

My two colleagues (John Collins, EIC for HRU, and Steve Hillier, EIC for MHR) joined me in establishing an editorial team of the ESHRE journals; in the course of our term in office (2007–2012), this team became the 'think-tank' of the ESHRE journals. Besides the three editors, the team consists of Editorial Office colleagues (Andy Williams (Managing Editor), Helen Beard and Kate Watkins), the Deputy Editors (Chris Barratt for MHR, Madelon van Wely for HRU and Hans Evers, Richard Sharpe and Edgardo Somigliana for HR), as well as our publishing partners from the Oxford University Press (Michael Brown and Phil Bishop). We meet at least twice a year before the Publications Subcommittee meetings and also keep in contact via email whenever needed. This editorial team provides an opportunity to evolve a holistic and professional approach across all

the three journals with a direct input into the day-to-day operation. Our aim is to strengthen the relationship between the journals, as well as with ESHRE, in the meetings of the Editors and the Publication Subcommittee and a debriefing meeting to the Executive Committee. Strategic planning for the future of the three ESHRE journals has been the core business of the editorial team. Thanks to the efforts of all involved the flagship position of the journals for the Society has been reflected in their prominent positions and their steadily increasing Impact Factors.

Personal experience as an editor of HR

My term as an editor coincides for sure with 'the evening' of my professional career and it has been, so far, my last commitment to ESHRE. My involvement in the Society started with Bob in 1985, first as a Treasurer of the Society, then in the three terms (Chairman-elect – Chairman – Past-Chairman), and then as an Executive Director until I became the HR Editor in 2007. I would like to mention here some of the highlights of being an editor.

- (i) The constructive and intense collaboration with the Editorial Office. It is now located in Childerley close to Cambridge and I enjoyed working there during my frequent visits. Andy, Helen, Kate and Katharine: I will miss these visits to Childerley and the many discussions we had on the current and future status of HR. The Deputy Editors (Giorgio, Hans, Richard and Edgardo) became more and more involved in the journal's operation, not least during our weekly teleconference but also during 'retreats' where we planned the 'new HR'.
- (ii) Interacting with the publisher, Oxford University Press, was for me a great support. I got to know the world of academic publishing better in all its aspects. My yearly participation in the Oxford journals Days convinced me of the highly skilled professionalism of the Press. New initiatives were discussed with an open mind; several of which have already been implemented. Although sometimes I may have felt that progress seemed slow, this impression may have been due to my ignorance of the ramifications and the extent of the changes involved. Some specific improvements deserve to be mentioned: the covers of the journals, the new layout, the quality of copy editing, the new extended abstract format, and more recently the development of mobile-optimized journal websites, iPhone apps and perhaps

most importantly a new format and publication model for the supplementary material. We have been jointly following a path that will, in my view, eventually lead to fully electronic journals.

- (iii) I considered it very much my role to be part of what is going on in scientific publishing and hence I attended the annual meetings of the Council of Science Editors and the Peer Review Congress (held every 4 years). The membership of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) will be discussed further in this editorial.

Role of our stakeholders

HR is doing well, the impact factor is a clear sign of this well-being. As editors we recognize that this is due to our authors, reviewers and associate editors. Our ultimate goal is to publish the very 'best' articles in our field, but this is primarily determined by the quality of what the authors send to us. A good journal depends on a devoted team of reviewers and associate editors. The yearly 'New Associate Editors course' has become an important event for the AEs of the three journals. This initiative was accepted in 2007 by ESHRE and Martin Richardson from OUP. It is fair to say that this initiative has been appreciated by all involved. The number of new submissions to HR is increasing substantially, probably due to the increased impact factor but also to the short turnaround time and the quality of the service we provide to our authors. As EIC, I decide on the fate of nearly 2000 new submissions per year. I make these decisions based on the reviews and AEs' recommendation but also on my own assessment; I do this as consistently as possible, bearing constantly in mind the quality of the manuscripts, the fairness to the authors and, last but not least, the interests of our readers. Since I have been an author myself, I am very well aware that as an editor you make a few authors happy but you disappoint many more.

Human Reproduction and publication ethics

Scientific journals play a gatekeeper's role in maintaining the scientific record as it ought to be a reflection of the truth. Publication ethics is, of course, the end-point of good research ethics, and promoting publication ethics starts with the promotion of honest research conduct. There is a general year-on-year increase in the number of publications; however, the number of retractions in PubMed is increasing at a faster rate than the number of articles published.

Early on in its history, HR joined the COPE (www.publicationethics.org). Currently, the COPE has well over 7000 member journals.

Even before I was an editor I followed the activities of the COPE, since I was always aware of the importance of promotion of scientific integrity as an advisor to a large research group, principal investigator of research projects, Dean of the Medical School and Vice Rector of the University. As soon as I became Deputy- and later EIC I attended the quarterly COPE Forum discussions, as well as the annual Seminar

held in London. I was elected onto the Council 2 years ago and as of March 2012 I became Secretary of COPE.

During my term as an EIC, we had to deal with a (fortunately limited) number of submitted manuscripts, but occasionally also published articles, where some ethical infringements had been reported to us: plagiarism, fabrication of data, simultaneous submissions of the same manuscript to two different journals, etc. We have investigated all these cases following the COPE Guidelines, as outlined in the flow-charts on how to deal with suspected unethical behavior. As of the beginning of this year, we have applied the *iThenticate* software (<http://www.ithenticate.com/>) to all manuscripts just prior to being accepted and where there appeared to be an unacceptably high level of similarity with previously published texts, a thorough investigation of the manuscript under suspicion is carried out. So far, our experience has been that a small number of almost-accepted manuscripts warranted further investigation such that we needed to contact the authors and ask for an explanation.

- The most serious case of ethical infringement I had to deal with during my editorship is reflected in the Editorial and two letters to the Editor in the July 2012 issue (<http://humrep.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2012/05/24/humrep.des167.full>). As mentioned in that Editorial I consider both ethical infringements to be very serious. Ethical approval for the work mentioned in both articles is required by law in the country where the research was carried out. Furthermore, all experimental evidence must be mentioned, even (and I dare to say, especially) when the findings are unexpected. These events have convinced me that the investigation of research and publication ethical infringements should be undertaken by independent bodies. In my own country, as well as on the international scene, I intend to promote (and encourage legislation for) the creation of independent bodies whose role would be to investigate and manage cases of scientific misconduct. The example of such bodies currently operational in for example Scandinavia and The Netherlands would be good models to follow. The integrity of what is done in research and what is published is, in my view, too important not to do the very best we can.

Conclusion

ESHRE has grown considerably since it all started in 1984–1985 and it has become a very well-established scientific society. I have been delighted to see the Society grow and develop. Past and current ESHRE leaders have had the adjective 'scientific' always in mind and this was part of the mission statement that Bob and other founding fathers wanted to have. We should never forget that mission. The journals' roles as flagships and promoters of science are in good hands with the teams of editors and deputy editors who will take over in January 2013.