

A Message from the Editor

As I write this column for Vol. 118, issue 1, on this day in January 2003, I have something to say, or perhaps “crow about” would be a more accurate description. For the first time since I arrived at the Journal two years ago, and for some period of time before that, an editor’s message can be written for use in an issue that will be produced on time. We have done it. We are caught up. This last year, in a sustained full effort, the staff have produced 10 issues and one supplement. Not a trivial achievement for a bimonthly journal, if I do say so myself.

Getting on schedule is not our only achievement. This last year we received 226 manuscripts. That is up 28% from 2001 and up 45% from 2000. We have had to become much more exclusive. I do not know if this is a good thing or a bad thing. Only about 20% of the manuscripts we received were ultimately accepted for publication. I am told, albeit through unscientific surveying, that the reason for the increasing interest in publishing in *Public Health Reports* is the array of quality public health articles that have appeared in the last couple of years, together with the tremendous strides we have made in reducing turnaround times for the manuscripts received.

Currently, every effort is made to acknowledge receipt of a manuscript within two days of its arrival. When the manuscript arrives by e-mail, an option that an ever-growing number of our contributors are using, it is acknowledged immediately. All manuscripts are passed along to the Editorial Committee for initial review within two weeks of receipt—e-mailed manuscripts in one week. About half of the manuscripts are turned down at that point and the authors are notified so that, if they wish, they can pursue publication in other venues. For those manuscripts that we decide to send on to peer review, about 90% are sent within four weeks of receipt. In the other 10%, the subject matter is either so specialized that finding appropriate reviewers is difficult, or it is a subject area so popular that the pool of available reviewers is exhausted by requests from our journal and others.

A meaningful metric for peer review turnaround time is difficult to compute because it is so variable. The ability to find reviewers to conduct peer review is, to say the least, difficult. At a minimum, it is a cyclical business, with it being near impossible some months to find reviewers who have the time required to take on the task. To respect these valued and essential re-

viewers, we tread lightly and do not push too hard to have them commit to a quick turnaround. This condition sometimes leads to delays, but (surprisingly) not that often. Most reviewers understand the vital role that they play and feel that it is both their obligation and privilege. In the end, the majority of authors of manuscripts that are accepted or conditionally accepted for publication in *Public Health Reports* are informed within just 12 weeks. We will continue to look for ways to accelerate turnaround times. This is but one way we are measuring the success of this journal.

In the tradition of *PHR*, we have continued to seek out papers of real and lasting importance. We shun publishing preliminary or incomplete work, even when it might involve high-profile subjects. This last year we have published manuscripts that we believe are going to remain important for a long time. Our cited half-life (the mean time articles are cited, and thus a measure of the lasting importance of the manuscripts we publish) is 9.7 years. That ranks *PHR* eighth among 99 journals included under the category Public, Environmental and Occupational Health by the Institute for Scientific Information. Unfortunately, this has come at a price. Publishing articles with lasting appeal is not necessarily good for a journal’s “impact factor.” This oft-used but generally misunderstood measure of a publication’s success is highly sensitive to fad, or what in the business is called “immediacy.” We are going to continue to resist any tendency to publish manuscripts solely for the purpose of increasing our impact factor.

I am proud of the accomplishments of the staff, editors, and directors of the Journal, and I must say that I am even a little proud of myself. But all of this, after all, is just yesterday’s news. We are already busy working on the future. The manuscripts are already chosen through issue number 4 of 2003 (July/August). There are some terrific articles coming up. More special topic issues are planned, since the ones we have produced to date have been so well received. More of the wonderful photography of Earl Dotter and more photo essays by other artists who serve as the conscience of public health are in the works, too. Plus more challenging commentary. And, finally, more research, which is the life’s blood of effective public health. Things are looking good!

Beginning with this issue, we introduce a new Department, *Law and the Public’s Health*. Sara Rosenbaum, Joel Teitelbaum, and Brian Kamoie at The George

Washington University Medical Center, School of Public Health and Health Services, Hirsh Health Law and Policy Program, will author this column. In their inaugural column appearing in this issue, they introduce themselves and explain where they come from and what it is they intend to present in the coming issues. I am particularly excited about this column and see it

as a wonderful opportunity to clarify this essential aspect of public health, which has always been, in my opinion, too segregated a component in the practice of public health.

Robert A. Rinsky, PhD

ERRATA:

In the frenzy of work caused by our efforts to catch up, I am afraid we made some omissions in a couple of the manuscripts we produced last year.

In Volume 116, number 2, we published a manuscript as an unauthored submission from the Association of Schools of Public Health. This ASPH column was, in actuality, a product of the work of Margaret A. Potter, JD, Associate Dean, and Director, Center for Public Health Practice, University of Pittsburgh, Graduate School of Public Health, and Alice Kindling, RN, MSNED, MSHYG, Administrator, Allegheny County Health Department.

Dr. Seymour Garte, author of the article, "The Racial Genetics Paradox in Biomedical Research and Public Health" that appeared in Volume 117, no. 5, pointed out to me that it should properly have included the acknowledgment "This work was supported by grant R03 HG002595 from the Ethical, Legal and Social Implications (ELSI) Program of the National Human Genome Research Institute of NIH."