

My Life as an Editor – Roger Jones



Roger Jones, Emeritus Professor of General Practice in the Department of Primary Care & Public Health Sciences at King's College London, became the editor of the *British Journal of General Practice* early in 2010.

Tell us about your early career

My father was a journalist and my son is a freelance science writer, so there is probably something genetic going on here. I have always enjoyed writing and seeing myself in print. After working in renal medicine and spending five years in general practice I moved into academic primary care. I was head of general practice and primary care at King's College London for 17 years. I edited *Family Practice*, published by Oxford University Press, for 10 years and then did penance by editing the *Oxford Textbook of Primary Medical Care* – two volumes, over 400 contributing authors, never again! I have been editing the *British Journal of General Practice* for the past 18 months.

How did you become a journal editor?

The first time I was simply asked by the previous editor if I would like to take over – those were the days. For the *BJGP* there was a rigorous and transparent recruitment and appointment process. The post of editor was advertised internationally, a formal shortlist was drawn up by a selection group from the Royal College of General Practitioners, and I was interviewed by senior college officers plus the chief executive officer.

What were your early responsibilities, and how soon did you know that this was a life career?

Editing *Family Practice* was a part-time job and the journal was published on a shoestring for many years, with infrastructural support for the editor heavily dependent on having an excellent PA/secretary in the department to handle submissions and responses – and of course this was at a time when submissions arrived on paper, in the post, in triplicate, with a floppy disc attached to them with a rubber band – which meant that brown cardboard boxes containing each issue were always being shunted around our offices. Times have changed.

The biggest “buzz” in those early days was feeling that you were developing an overview of the way in which primary care research was being conducted around the world and that you were in a position to make a difference by getting the best of it into print.

What is the hardest editorial decision you have had to make?

The toughest one was when I was editing the *Oxford Textbook*. We were absolutely at the deadline for chapter

completion and I received one very late chapter which had been given the OK by the section editor. I decided to have a look at it and found that it was unpublishably dreadful. It was on a subject I knew little about, but as there was no chance of getting someone to re-write it I locked myself away for 12 hours with textbooks and the internet and wrote it from scratch – and as far as I know the original author didn't notice. After this I am unimpressed by people who say they can't turn an editorial round in a couple of weeks.

What are the biggest changes you have seen in editing?

Electronics, clearly – manuscript handling systems, reviewer databases, web publishing, apps, citation databases – all essential nowadays. The ability to run your journal from anywhere in the world is an incredible advance.

Do the changes in the publishing industry fire you up or make you flag?

I'm generally enthused by all this, especially when I talk to younger colleagues, whose predictions on the future of paper publishing in the next couple of decades drive me to think harder about where we want to be in 5 or 10 years' time.

What advice would you offer a young editor?

Get familiar with all aspects of the journal, including the commercial and financial ones – keep asking questions, and pay attention to detail. Until you are sure that you are on top of the systems and that everyone on the journal is doing a great job, keep a very close eye on it. Don't get isolated – create a small group of advisers, virtual if need be; go to conferences and meetings that refresh, inform, and stimulate you.

BJGP has just had a makeover. How would you advise editors contemplating such an initiative?

We wanted to make the *BJGP* more attractive and accessible to readers – academics and service GPs alike – so we embarked on a paper short/web long strategy for publishing original research. We reorganised, colour-coded, and brightened up the internal sections of the journal and decided to have a different cover image every month.

My advice is to take re-design soundings from colleagues and key stakeholders – that is, those most likely to object to change – whilst having a fairly clear idea of what you want yourself (and in this case after discussion with the editorial board and groups of younger GPs).

What do you predict for yourself and your journal five years from now?

I'll be ready to hand it on then and I hope that we will be more widely read and more profitable than we are now. I'd like to ensure much wider global reach, with free or heavily subsidised access for low income countries. I'd like to give our reviewers and authors an excellent service with individual feedback, and I'd like to see the journal participating in research in many areas of academic publication/dissemination.