

CORRESPONDENCE

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Because we receive many more letters than we have room to publish we may shorten those that we do publish to allow readers as wide a selection as possible. In particular, when we receive several letters on the same topic we reserve the right to abridge individual letters. Our usual policy is to reserve our correspondence columns for letters commenting on issues discussed recently (within six weeks) in the *BMJ*.

Letters critical of a paper may be sent to the authors of the paper so that their reply may appear in the same issue. We may also forward letters that we decide not to publish to the authors of the paper on which they comment.

Letters should not exceed 400 words and should be typed double spaced and signed by all authors, who should include their main degree.

How accurate are quotations and references in medical journals?

SIR,—The excellent paper by Dr Gerald de Lacey and his colleagues (28 September, p 884) prompts me to pose two questions. Firstly, does good scholarship require so many references? Secondly, would the proportion of errors be smaller if there were fewer references?

In seeking to answer these I start from the proposition that the sole purpose of references is to help the reader and not to demonstrate the breadth of the author's knowledge. References in review articles are the source data and so they must be listed. But in papers on "original" research their purpose is to set the background of the work and to provide comparison and contrast to the findings. In this case too few references will leave the work isolated from the general corpus of knowledge but too many, especially those not of immediate relevance, can only confuse.

Much of the problem of inaccurate referencing stems from an inability of authors to separate wheat from chaff; indeed, they may not themselves have actually read some of the chaff. The medical literature is so large and of such uneven quality that authors would be doing us all a service if they allowed many potential references to rest in obscurity. I contend that prolix referencing flows from a desire of authors to be seen as "scholarly." This may be a consequence of the distorted values propagated by universities, since research students

are often required to embark on huge, and usually (for the reader) exceedingly boring, literature reviews before they may begin original research.

A related phenomenon is spurious scholasticism. My hypothesis is that the number of references per hundred words of text is inversely proportional to the theoretical coherence of a field of knowledge. For example, physicists do not refer to Newton's original writings every time they use his mechanics, whereas social scientists have a tendency to cite an original source for the seemingly most trivial insight. Perhaps someone, in true Popperian spirit, would wish to engage in research to falsify my hypothesis? If so, I hope that this letter will be in their reference list.

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SIR,—As guest editors for a recent special issue of the *British Journal of Medical Psychology*¹ we were impressed by the high incidence of inaccuracy in submitted papers. This was particularly true of initial submissions. Some authors were more careless than others in making omissions in citation or in not following the appropriate method of referencing, but errors of one sort or another were

present in most papers. As far as we could tell, and from the comments of outside assessors, where errors of quotation existed these resulted from careless expression. Thus, we were interested to note that Dr Gerald de Lacey and colleagues found, "In most instances errors were caused by either carelessness or misleading use of language" (28 September, p 884).

Because of our concern about the distortions created by misleading errors of quotation, as well as the inconvenience caused by inaccuracy in referencing, we fully support the authors' suggestions that editors should sample references from each paper and, when errors are found, not only return the paper for rechecking but also delay publication and that journals should carry a column entitled "Misquotations" where seriously misquoted authors would have a voice.

Our only criticism of these suggestions is that generally praise tends to be better than punishment in shaping behaviour. Further thought should therefore be given to positively reinforcing authors who have a high standard of accuracy. Possibly an editors' letter of acceptance or rejection to an author could explicitly comment either negatively or positively on the standard of quotation and citation. Procedures of this sort should go some way towards encouraging greater care and accuracy in contributions to academic journals. As