An Editorial on Editorials

With this issue it is planned to publish editorials as a regular feature. It is believed that editorials may serve useful purposes in this journal, in addition to the reports of original research and the reviews in "Clinical Progress" and "Clinical Conferences."

Editorials are chiefly expressions of opinion. Since the human intellect has infinite versatility, editorials usually display refreshing variety. The fact that this Journal is concerned with cardiovascular disease can hardly be regarded as confining. For, as our perception of the interplay between the circulation and the functions of every organ has widened, cardiology has almost ceased to be a specialty; rather, it embraces and is embraced by all of medicine. Our comprehension of the physiology and disorders of the cardiovascular system has drawn on all medical disciplines and fields of biology and science. Advances in metabolism, nutrition, electrophysics, radioisotopes, blood coagulation, bacteriology, immunology, genetics, physical chemistry, and biochemistry are but a few disciplines that may be cited. For a clinician or an investigator to be conversant with the main trends and the stage of evolution of knowledge, even in fields adjacent to his primary interest, is not only difficult but indeed often impossible.

Moreover, the clinician is confronted by the even more urgent and at times agonizing decision as to whether knowledge has reached the stage where it may justifiably and safely be applied to the improvement of diagnosis and treatment of his patient. Editorials are not oracular pronouncements that can provide complete answers to all these diverse problems; they may be of assistance, however, when written by an authority in a given subject.

In cardiology, as in medicine in general, knowledge regarding certain phenomena, such as atherosclerosis, may be considerable but incomplete. To survey the territory and delineate the areas that are already established and those that are wholly or incompletely explored may greatly hasten progress. By clearly defining the gaps in our knowledge, further speculation, clinical observations, and productive research are stimulated.

Editorial writers for a scientific journal should be selected with the most scrupulous care. They should be as wise as can be expected of man; they should be broad in their outlook; their integrity should be of the highest; and they should be possessed of detailed knowledge of the subject about which they write. They are entrusted with a grave responsibility, that of guiding and influencing the thoughts of those less familiar with the field; this may have a long-range effect. In medicine it often indirectly affects the lives of others. The writer should attempt to present his subject without bias. Unhappily, the perfect editor who would fulfill all these qualifications does not exist in this human world. Complete freedom from bias is probably not within the power of man. The editor's experience up to the moment of expression of an opinion focuses as if through a lens to produce an image. What comes forth may be true or false, or arise from that shadowy area where confusion and half-truths lie. This presents special difficulties. In medicine Emotions play a part that cannot be ignored. We have seen leaders of medicine influenced by one or two good or bad experiences with a drug to such an extent that strong evidence, which is later available in one direction or the other, is discounted. One can say that this is not science, but their opinions expressed.
publicly through teaching or editorials may confuse the issue for long periods. In some controversial areas asking for a judgment regarding the recent findings of other workers may be like asking for an impartial history of the Civil War written from the Southern viewpoint.

It is not uncommon for a smoothly and even convincingly written article to represent in fact a facade for a shabby edifice. To determine value the buyer must examine what lies behind the final product. Editorial errors in the evaluation of reports may be quite apparent to those expert in a field, but they may also influence and confuse practitioners and students who tend to accept an editorial as an authoritative stamp of approval. Even those well acquainted with a field and its workers, and possessing familiarity with its possible pitfalls as a result of personal experience, may err in their conclusions; but it is reasonable to assume that such writers are less likely to err in this manner. Under no circumstances, however, should editors be regarded as "sacred cows" whose prophecies or opinions are above attack. In the final analysis what they present are merely the conclusions of individuals and should be regarded as such.

A custom, which fortunately appears to be on its way out, is that of allowing the editors to cast their darts about from behind the cloak of anonymity. Editorials should be signed, indicating that the writer stands foursquare behind his statements.

Perhaps the greatest services that an editorial writer can perform are to direct attention to the most promising of new studies or areas of investigation, and to question accepted theories, the bases of which seem insecure. His own knowledge of the field should help him to cull the grain. His challenge is to stimulate the reader to study the original reports critically and with fair scepticism regarding the thoroughness of case or experimental data, the care with which controls are planned, the validity of the statistical analysis (frequently the weakest component of a medical paper), and the background and character of the authors.

It is the editor's constant hope that he will stir some latent thought process, will initiate a chain reaction, will activate a young mind to pursue an original approach toward a scientific problem, or will stimulate a physician to learn more about a disease or an entire discipline. Research advances in the field of circulation are very exciting today. The horizons are limitless. The paths are new and varied. They are, however, often confusing, and it requires special skills to cut through in the right directions.

It will be an objective of the writers of this series to apply their experience and knowledge in pointing toward the most promising of these trail-blazing efforts.

**Irving S. Wright, Chairman, Publications Committee**

**Herrman L. Blumgart, Editor-in-Chief**
An Editorial on Editorials
IRVING S. WRIGHT and HERRMAN L. BLUMGART

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