Joy and Chagrin of an Editor

At the end of 2010, I will have completed the third year of my Editorship of *Gerontology* and I still find this task highly interesting, stimulating and challenging. Interesting, because – contrary to other journals in the field – *Gerontology* publishes a broad spectrum of papers in its four different sections. To me as a scientist active in gerontological research, the Editorship is stimulating, because it allows me to learn about the many different facets of our discipline, entailing a rewarding extension of my own horizon. Finally, the task is challenging because, together with the Section Editors, I not only have to guarantee the high quality of published papers, but also to maintain high standards for competence and fairness when dealing with the submitted manuscripts.

As a scientist, I have, of course, experienced both competent and incompetent, fair as well as unfair treatment of my own submitted manuscripts, including some rare cases of instant acceptance, much more frequent instant rejections, most often requirement of minor or major revision. Since one of my main personal goals is to be a good mentor for students, post-docs and even senior investigators, being confronted with negative criticism or the occasional crushing comment has meant to console the authors and to motivate them into improving the manuscript and resubmitting it – either to the original or to a different journal. As a matter of fact, I have always considered it at least as important to teach members of my group ‘the art of losing’ as to commend their work and celebrate their success.

The large influx of manuscripts arriving in the Editorial office of *Gerontology* has made it necessary to significantly increase our rejection rate in the course of the

year. This often is a very difficult and even grievous task, since I do, of course, know that these papers contain data that have been obtained with ‘one’s heart’s blood’.

This is especially true in the case of immediate negative decisions by myself or the responsible Section Editor, who first scrutinize each submission with respect to scientific quality, timeliness, geriatric instead of gerontological content, and lack of adherence to the formal rules laid down in our Mission Statement. This ‘Triage’ system allows for a reaction to submissions usually within 24 h after a manuscript’s arrival, giving the authors the chance to submit their work to another – perhaps more specialized – journal without delay.

Reviewers for *Gerontology* are asked to complete a standard form and add their comments in a more extensive text that is passed on to the authors. In the form, they also are asked to rank the scientific quality of a paper, and at present, *Gerontology* accepts only those that are listed in the upper 15%. However, I take it as the prerogative of an Editor-in-Chief to occasionally disregard this classification based on my own expertise or that of colleagues whom I ask for additional advice.

In the – fortunately very rare – instance that two reviewers come to completely opposite conclusions, it is the duty of the Editor-in-Chief to make a final decision. If the manuscript has been rated below the top 15% by both reviewers, then this decision is not so difficult to make. This is also true in those cases where the topic of the paper falls into the immediate expertise of myself or senior members of my group.

If both of these points are not applicable, I usually act as a ‘reserve’ Section Editor, and solicit one or two addi-

tional reviewer/s myself. Their judgment will then support either the positive or the negative comments. In this way, I try to be as fair to the authors as possible, but occasionally injustice still cannot be avoided and I apologize to the authors for any disappointment that this may have caused.

It goes without saying that I always read the comments of the reviewers carefully and purge them of impolite or even rude comments.

This is perhaps a good time to confess a small idiosyncrasy of mine: I am allergic to priority statements, i.e. an author's claim that this is the 'first description' of a given result. I think, one should let the readers determine priority and in my experience such a claim is rather often due to a lack of knowledge of the literature that has been published more than three years ago. I am also keen on assessing the quality of a paper by the content of the Abstract and also get an idea about its possible future impact when reading the last paragraph of the Discussion. There, in my opinion, authors should stick out their head and make clear statements about what they have achieved and what has to be done, rather than offering a generic call for more research.

So far, I have addressed scientific problems with which an Editor-in-Chief is confronted. Now I would like to end this section of my Editorial by speaking about an easily avoidable problem that may lead to the rejection of papers on non-scientific grounds, namely the authors' inability to comply with formal requests laid down in the Mission Statement of *Gerontology*. Original Research Papers that do not comply with these requests, but deal with an interesting topic, are usually passed on to the Section Editor and reviewers respectively, but the authors are informed immediately about the formal shortcomings that will have to be taken care of in a possibly final accepted version.

Gerontology only allows one revision. Occasionally, authors do not provide a point-to-point response to the questions and suggestions of the reviewers, or neglect to

explain why they want to adhere to an original statement or presentation of a data set that was criticized by the reviewers. In these instances, I may have to make the difficult decision not to accept the manuscript for publication. Furthermore, *Gerontology* does not accept Extensive Reviews, Mini-Reviews, Viewpoints or Debates that are submitted without being solicited. It goes without saying that even solicited manuscripts have to undergo expert review as pointed out in our invitation letter. In this letter, I also inform our potential authors that they have to adhere to formal rules with regard to the length of the manuscript, number of references, etc. In most instances, these prerequisites are met and – exceptional scientific standards provided – these invited manuscripts are then published and are in general highly acclaimed by our audience. In some instances, however, authors of Mini-Reviews, Viewpoints, etc. do not accept that an invited paper is subject to scientific review and they are also not willing to, for example, shorten their manuscripts to the required length. In this case, I have to decline such an invited manuscript because publication would unfairly delay the appearance of interesting accepted Original Research Papers that wait in the pipeline.

In conclusion, being the Editor-in-Chief of *Gerontology* is a rewarding scientific and personal experience that I keep on enjoying. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those supporting me in this task, above all the Section Editors and the members of the Editorial Board. I am especially grateful for their constructive and critical suggestions and their active input of innovative ideas.

The joy of running *Gerontology* is to a large part due to the fact that I only have to focus on the scientific part of this job. I therefore wholeheartedly thank Mrs. Süss for expertly dealing with the administrative matters and the Karger publishing house for the smooth and efficient cooperation. I am looking forward to 2011 with great expectations!

G. Wick, Innsbruck