

## A Call for Letters to the Editor

The reason for the existence of peer-reviewed journals is presumably to support the creation and dissemination of knowledge. One part of what peer-reviewed journals do is to publish articles that describe research done in the field of interest. This in and of itself is important and necessary for the advancement of any area of inquiry; in order for the state of the art to move forward, articles published this year become the basis for more advanced articles published in the future. Indeed, the field of performing arts medicine has made significant strides over the last two decades in large part due to the work that has been published in this journal.

But this is not the only way that knowledge advances. Presentations at scientific meetings are also important. While they are typically heard by only a fraction of the number of people who subscribe to a journal, they provide the opportunity for discussion between the presenter and the audience. As anyone who has attended a scientific meeting knows, the “question and answer” time is often the most illuminating and interesting part of the formal proceedings of some meetings. This can be a result of an audience member pointing out a methodological problem in the work presented or simply offering a new perspective on the topic.

There is an analogous process in the world of peer-reviewed publications that has been underutilized in *Medical Problems of Performing Artists*. Even though no author is present when the reader receives his or her copy of the journal, it is still possible and important for the reader to ask a question of

or make a suggestion to the author (and the rest of the readership). The “letter to the editor” is the mechanism by which we can engage in the same kind of give-and-take that happens during a presentation, albeit over a somewhat longer timeframe. In many scientific journals, there are as many letters to the editor as there are original articles in each issue. They can point out an error, raise a question of problems with study design, suggest the possibility of unrecognized bias, or offer an alternative interpretation of the data.

Another “use” of the letter to the editor is to introduce new data or perspectives in a briefer format than would be required for publication of a full-length article. This could be related to a recently published article, perhaps by reporting a similar survey of a different and smaller population or an individual case report that illustrates a particular point. However, a letter to the editor could be unrelated to any particular article in recent issues of that journal, simply reporting a case or small case series or making a clinical observation. In fact, a letter is every reader’s chance to do what the editor does: express his or her (hopefully well reasoned) opinion on a subject.

Why don’t we see more letters to the editor in *MPPA*? Since the journal’s founding, the average issue has had zero to one letter. (Lest I be accused of urging readers to “do as I say, not as I do,” let me point out that I have written a letter to the editor of this journal. I’ll buy a drink in Aspen next June for the first person [previous editors excluded] to email me with the volume and issue number in which that letter

appeared.) As mentioned, many peer-reviewed journals publish several letters per issue, and some have to decide which ones to publish and which to reject. While I do not see *MPPA* needing to make that kind of editorial decision in the foreseeable future, I would like to see more editorial correspondence. With a subscription base of several hundred, each issue would have more than one letter to the editor if each reader were to write a letter once every 20 years!

As I stated above, even though I do not intend to reject submitted letters, there is an editorial review process. In most cases, this is simply a review by the editor, although the editor reserves the right to ask for peer review if indicated. In addition, if the letter is about a recent article, the author of that article is typically given the opportunity to respond. Again, this is in keeping with the desire to engage in a dialogue that will help to advance the field.

Readers who are a little anxious about the idea of writing a letter to the editor should take some comfort in this process. The brief editorial review of a submitted letter makes it a less intimidating prospect than asking a question at the end of a presentation. Some people are afraid to ask a question, for fear of the speaker “putting down” the questioner in his or her response from the podium. That will not happen in this journal, both because the intent of the question can be clarified during the editorial review process and because the author’s reply will likewise be reviewed for tone and clarity.

In closing, to show that I’m ready to put my money where my mouth (or

“pen”) is, I hereby announce the opening of another “contest.” I will buy a drink at the PAMA Annual Meeting in Aspen next June for the first three readers who write a letter to the editor that can be published prior to the meeting—

previous editors are eligible, limit one per person.

Write a letter to me and (more importantly) to your colleagues in performing arts medicine. We’ll continue the discussion at the PAMA Annual Meeting.

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### **NOTA BENE**

We are pleased to announce that as of June 2005 **Dr. Ralph A. Manchester** has assumed the Editorship of *MPPA*, succeeding Dr. Brandfonbrener. Manuscripts to be considered for publication and other editorial correspondence regarding the journal should be addressed to him at:

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