

News Notes

As URLs for electronic sources can be lengthy, shortened URLs are given for some News Notes items. The complete URL can be found on the EASE blog (<http://ease-bookshelf.blogspot.com>) or obtained from the compiler (rhurley@bmj.com).

Government dismisses simplified spellings

The UK schools secretary, Ed Balls, has dismissed as “nonsense” claims that tricky English spellings hinder children’s education. The literacy researcher Masha Bell said that by the age of 11 children face 800 words with difficult spellings – such as monkey, spinach, caterpillar, dwarf, soldiers, and stomach – at a recent conference of the Spelling Society (www.spellingsociety.org). The society campaigns to raise awareness of “the problems caused by the irregularity of English spelling” and promotes spelling reform. “English has an unspeakably awful spelling system,” she told the *Observer* newspaper. “It is the worst of all the alphabetical languages.” (www.guardian.co.uk, 8 Jun 2008, “English is too hard to read for children”).

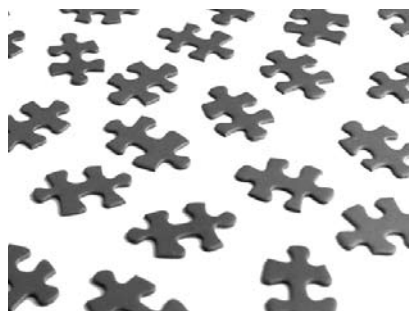
Peer reviews stay private

The *New England Journal of Medicine* has been told by a federal magistrate that it does not have to hand over peer reviews to the drug company Pfizer. The company recently issued subpoenas to try to force journals to disclose confidential peer reviews and other materials relating to studies of its painkillers Celebrex (celecoxib) and Bextra (valdecoxib), which are the subject of lawsuits. Three weeks ago an Illinois judge ruled against Pfizer after it issued almost identical subpoenas to *JAMA* and the *Archives of Internal Medicine*. (*Nature* 2008;452:677; doi: 10.1038/452677d)

Editorial boards lack women

Women made up only a fifth (21%) of the editorial boards in 2005, although they were far worse represented in 1970, when they had just 1% of positions, a 35 year study of 16 prominent biomedical journals has shown (*Archives of Internal Medicine* 2008;168:547-8). Seven per cent of the journals’ chief editors have been women, but having a female editor

made no significant difference to the sex distribution of the board. Women were better represented in specialty clinical journals, such as the *Pediatrics*, and general medical journals, such as the *BMJ*, than in biomedical science journals, such as *Cell*. In an accompanying editorial (p 446) Nanette Wenger calls for journals to “explore their ranks for gender diversity”.



The power of n=1

Two new journals hope to harness the evidence in medical case reports. *Cases Journal* (www.casesjournal.com), launched by BioMed Central in May, is open access and peer reviewed and authors must pay £99 per report. *BMJ Case Reports* (<http://casereports.bmj.com>) is a free online journal launched in June. It charges authors an annual fee of £95, and they can submit as many reports as they like. Case reports are weak evidence but are a starting point for further research, the editors say, and together they might provide evidence for people with comorbidities, who are often excluded from randomised trials. (See www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/may/14/medicine20)

Spanish portal opens access

A national portal for Spanish open access scientific publications, Recolecta (www.recolecta.net), has been launched. The project is a collaboration between the Spanish network of libraries REBIUN and the Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology (FECYT) to

provide a national search service for open access publishing in science. Recolecta seeks to stimulate open access publishing in Spain; to coordinate the creation of a national infrastructure of institutional repositories; and to serve as a central point of information on all topics related to open access. The search engine will find open access documents in journals, institutional repositories, and disciplinary repositories. (www.knowledgespeak.com/forward.asp?newsID=5918)

Email damages productivity

The three billion emails sent a day in the United Kingdom are “leaving us tired, frustrated and unproductive.” A third of office workers suffer “email stress,” and dealing with pointless messages may cost UK business £39m a year. These are the conclusions of a BBC2 *Money Programme* in March called “Email is ruining my life!” Some firms are trialing email-free days and hiring consultants to solve the problem. To reduce the burden, get a good spam filter, choose your email’s recipients carefully, write more clearly, and reduce automatic interruptions from email software, experts suggest. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/7281707.stm> and see “Email time bandits” www.dailymail.co.uk/)

Publishers confirm authors’ rights

Advocating that authors add copyright postscripts to journal publishing agreements is a call for needless bureaucracy, said the International Association of Scientific, Technical, and Medical Publishers in March. The publishers’ group has issued a statement which it says clarifies authors’ rights: “Standard journal agreements typically allow authors to use their published paper . . . for educational purposes . . . and to post some version of the paper on a preprint server, their institutional repository, or a personal

website.” Michael Mabe, head of the association, said, “Policy debate should be . . . based on evidence and consultation.” (www.stm-assoc.org/documents-statements-public-co/ and www.stm-assoc.org/press-releases/)

Enough conflicts of interest?

In March the *BMJ* asked whether the hunt for authors’ conflicts of interests had gone too far. Thomas Stossel argued that restrictions on academics’ interaction with commercial companies damages research because they exclude qualified experts from writing in some journals. They also limit financial rewards that professionals can receive from private companies or even ban corporate consulting, he said. Kirby Lee, however, believes that competing interests “require management to prevent potential bias, or the perception of bias, in medical decision making or research.” Of 443 voters in an online poll 45% agreed that the hunt had gone too far. (*BMJ* 2008;336:476-7)

XML extra for Word helps editors

An extension to Word 2007 allows science journal editors to create article templates, tailored for their individual requirements. These templates can encourage authors to write articles with greater consistency and to include semantic information, which is essential for the search of articles in digital form. Microsoft has released the enhancement, which supports the use of the National Library of Medicine’s XML (extensible markup language) format and National Center for Biotechnology Information format for digital books. This “will help publishers to process these articles in their editorial and production departments,” said Ahmed Hindawi, chief of the publisher Hindawi. See www.microsoft.com/mscorp/tc/scholarly_communication.msp.

WHO renames bird flu viruses

The World Health Organization has standardized the nomenclature for H5N1 avian influenza viruses. The group of “Fujian-like” viruses should be referred to as “clade 2.3.4,” for example. WHO says the reason for

the change is scientific and that it was already in progress when China complained that the name stigmatizes its province. Clade 2.3.4 viruses are not restricted to Fujian—they have caused cases of bird flu in humans in Laos, Burma, and Vietnam. “The geographical naming system [is] rather confusing and unspecific; this more precise numbering system is far more rigorous,” said Edward Holmes, a flu genomicist. See www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/guidelines/nomenclature/en. (*Nature* 2008 Apr 23; doi: 10.1038/452923a)



Le bloc replaces the blog

The English words “blog,” “email,” and “podcast” have been banned by the French government, to be replaced by the more French sounding “bloc,” “courriel,” and “diffusion pour baladeur.” The French ministry of culture is worried about the anglicisation of the French language and has listed French replacements for 500 English words that are commonly used in France. Football commentators have been asked to use “entraîneur” and “coup de pied de coin” instead of “coach” and “corner.” A spokesman said, “French is a living language rich enough to speak for itself without the need for hundreds of English expressions.” (www.mirror.co.uk/news/topstories/2008/03/12/ and http://my.telegraph.co.uk/maggie_millington/march_2008/)

Save the semicolon?

France is debating the future of the semicolon, according to a *Guardian* blog. The “point virgule,” the writer François Cavanna is reported as saying, is “a parasite, a timid, fainthearted, insipid thing, denoting merely uncertainty, a lack

of audacity, a fuzziness of thought.” But defendants cite Hugo, Flaubert, and Voltaire as writers for whom the mark was essential. Writers such as George Orwell, Lynne Truss, and Will Self give their views. Meanwhile, in New York the sign “Please put it in a trash can, that’s good news for everyone” has been revised to include a semicolon, but the *Financial Times* reports that “Americans see the semicolon as punctuation’s axis of evil.” (www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/apr/04/ and <http://normblog.typepad.com/normblog/2008/03/>)

Vigilante copy edits America

An illustrated blog (www.jeffdeck.com/teal/blog) has been started to document errors in public signage and their correction by the Typo Eradication Advancement League, reports Andrew Mueller in the *Guardian* (April 14). Armed with marker pens and correction fluid, Jeff Deck aims to correct as many typos in signs, posters, and restaurant menus as he can in a three month trip across the United States. Deck, a former editor for an academic publishing house in Washington, DC, said, “I had internalised the *Chicago Manual of Style* . . . and thought it would be a good thing to go around raising awareness.” (<http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/>)

Blog till you drop

Two fatal heart attacks in the United States may have been a result of stress caused by excessive blogging, an article in the *New York Times* says. Other bloggers complain of weight loss or gain, sleep disorders, and mental health problems. Bloggers are “toiling under great physical and emotional stress created by the around-the-clock internet economy that demands a steady stream of news and comment,” the article says. In some sectors blogging is highly competitive. Financial rewards are often low and based on the number of posts written or on the hits an entry gets. Some journalists have been fired for not meeting hits targets. (www.nytimes.com/2008/04/06/ and <http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/news/2008/04/>)

Medline has 121,000 duplicate articles

Researchers estimate that the Medline database contains 121,000 duplicate articles. They analysed more than 62,213 abstracts indexed in Medline and found that 421 (1.4%) were duplicates with the same authors, and extrapolated this to the entire database, they report in a commentary in *Nature* (2008;451:397-9; doi: 10.1038/451397a). The detection of duplicate papers has not kept up with the rapid growth in scientific publication, they say, and journals should use software to identify duplication and expose unethical authors. Duplicate publication was discussed on a *Nature* blog, <http://network.nature.com/forums/harvardpublishingforum/954>. (See *Bioinformatics* 2008;24:243-9; doi: 10.1093/bioinformatics/btm574.)

Research misconduct is largely undetected

Questionable research practices are common and probably do more damage to science than the “big three” of fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism, said Nick Steneck, consultant to the US Office of Research Integrity, in April at a conference on the governance of good research conduct in the United Kingdom. These practices include poor design, incomplete literature review, failure to report some evidence, unreported outcomes, failure to declare conflicts of interest, and redundant publication. US surveys have asked researchers about the incidence of serious research misconduct; they show that between 0.1% and 1% of researchers have committed serious misconduct. (*BMJ* 2008;336:913; doi: 10.1136/bmj.39556.698646.DB.)

Free access boosts science

Low cost access to research in poor countries has been accompanied by an advance in scientific discovery, an analysis by the publisher Elsevier suggests. The Health InterNetwork Access to Research Initiative (HINARI), run by the World Health Organization, subsidises access to Elsevier journals. Between 2002

and 2006, in 105 countries with HINARI access papers published in international peer reviewed journals rose 63%, compared with 38% in 102 rich countries. Kimberley Parker, HINARI's programme manager, said “We are pleased to be able to say that we look to be a contributing factor but we can't prove it.” <http://www.scidev.net/en/science-communication/news/>



Nature rallies for evolution

Between now and the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth on 12 February 2009, science academies and societies should summarize evidence for evolution on their websites and take every opportunity to promote it, a *Nature* editorial says. Resources to help include the US National Academy of Sciences' updated booklet *Science, Evolution, and Creationism* (www.nap.edu/sec). And the palaeontologist Kevin Padian destroys the false assertions by creationists that there are critical gaps in the fossil record in a court testimony (www.sciohost.org/ncse/kvd/Padian/Padian_transcript.html). Darwin's complete works are online at <http://darwin-online.org.uk>. Creationism is strong in the United States and rising in Europe (<http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc07/EDOC11297.htm>). (*Nature* 2008;451:108; doi: 10.1038/451108b)

Advice for strong observational studies

The STROBE statement, guidelines to strengthen the reporting of observational studies in epidemiology, has recently been published in German (*Internist* 2008;49:688-93; doi: 10.1007/s00108-008-2138-4) and Spanish (*Gaceta Sanitaria* 2008;22:144-50). The guidelines cover what should be included in a report

to increase its generalisability and usefulness. The English guidelines for cohort, case-control, and cross sectional studies have been published in several top journals. A translation was published in the Chinese edition of the *Lancet*. Medical journals are increasingly adopting the recommendations. The translations are available at www.strobe-statement.org.

One million English words?

The English language will soon have a million words, predicts one language expert. A new word is created every 98 minutes, and the millionth word will arrive on 29 April, 2009. The 1.35 billion English speakers in the world, along with email and the internet, give rise to new words, says Paul Payack of the Global Language Monitor (<http://www.languagemonitor.com/?m=200806>). But though we have nearly a million words at our disposal, the average person's vocabulary consists of fewer than 14,000 words, and someone who is “linguistically gifted” would use about 70,000 words.

Students plagiarise plagiarism code

Students at the University of Texas at San Antonio drafted a code to discourage plagiarism, but they took sections from Brigham Young University's plagiarism code, which they found online, a *Nature* blog reports. They even copied the definition of plagiarism. Both codes say, “Inadvertent plagiarism involves the inappropriate, but non-deliberate, use of another's words, ideas, or data without appropriate attribution.” The student in charge of the project said that the lack of credit was an oversight. The entire *Nature* blog entry was copied from other (referenced) sources. (http://blogs.nature.com/news/thegreatbeyond/2008/04/schools_plagiarism_code_plagia.html)

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