

EDITORIALS



Innovations in Correspondence

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Whatever their nature, letters to the editor were much appreciated by the addressee. They kept him and his *Journal* on their toes. They identified errors that would otherwise go unnoticed. They brought controversy out into the open. Moreover, their variety, brevity and frequent sparkle contributed in a fresh and informal way to the *Journal*'s appeal.¹

Written a quarter-century ago by former editor Franz J. Ingelfinger, this description of the *Journal*'s Correspondence section is still accurate today. Letters to the editor have two important functions. They provide a forum for readers to comment about articles recently published in the *Journal*, and they are a place to publish concise articles, such as reports of novel cases. Today we announce changes in our procedures for letters in the former category (those that comment on a published article), with the aim of expediting their publication.

Letters written in response to articles recently published in the *Journal* have the greatest impact if they are insightful and are published rapidly. The entire process of receipt, selection, editing, and publishing of readers' responses and authors' replies typically requires weeks, and in many cases, months. To accelerate this process, we are instituting several changes in our procedures.

Henceforth, we will consider letters about a published article only if they are submitted electronically through our Web site (<http://www.nejm.org>) within three weeks after publication of the article. Submissions on paper, by facsimile, or by e-mail will not be considered or returned. To submit an electronic letter to the editor, writers should go from the home page of our Web site to the section "For Authors and Reviewers" and click on "Submit a Letter," or go directly to <http://secure.nejm.org/letters>.

Instructions will guide the submission of the letter. Letter writers do not need to be subscribers to the *Journal*.

The length of these letters cannot exceed 175 words. In setting this limit, we aim to encourage succinct, thoughtful commentary, allowing us to publish more letters reflecting diverse opinions. Letters must be both concise and well crafted; at most, one or two points about the *Journal* article can be made. Letter writers do not need to summarize the findings of the studies they are discussing; a sentence or two of introduction and background is enough to set the context.

For subscribers interested in letters about a particular *Journal* article, we are offering a new electronic service. As soon as letters about an article are published, the Web address for the letters will be e-mailed to individual subscribers who have requested it. This option will be available through our Web site, and subscribers can select it when they are reading the electronic version of the *Journal* article.

These new procedures will apply only to letters that comment on recently published articles. Guidelines for freestanding letters — those not related to *Journal* articles — are unchanged. At the correspondent's discretion, such letters can be submitted either electronically or on paper, and the limit on length remains 400 words. Information on both types of letter can be found on our Web site and in the *Journal* under "Instructions for Letters to the Editor," at the end of the Correspondence section.

The new procedures take effect on January 23, 2003. We anticipate that they will substantially improve this valuable forum for reader opinion. Should you get the epistolary itch,¹ please write to us about these innovations (comments@nejm.org).

1. Ingelfinger FJ. The epistolary itch. *N Engl J Med* 1977;297:277. Copyright © 2003 Massachusetts Medical Society.