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About Our Journal and Our Society

Leaving the office of Chief Editor of our journal I would like to express my gratitude to my colleagues of the European Society of Human Genetics for the confidence they expressed in me by appointing me to this office when the *European Journal of Human Genetics* was founded 3 years ago. Due to new professional commitments, I cannot serve a second term. At the same time, I think it is an excellent indication of the state of health of the journal that the Society was able to find and nominate in a very short time a new Chief Editor in the person of Gert-Jan van Ommen, who represents, in my opinion, an outstanding choice.

Before I step down, I feel an obligation to give a brief personal account of the foundation of our journal and of the lessons I have learned from this experience. When I was elected President of the Society in Corfu in 1990, it was clear to all of us that the Society, the statutes of which were being reformed to allow a democratic participation of all members in policy decisions, needed an official voice. I therefore took the initiative of proposing a plan for the foundation of the journal at the following Congress in Leuven in 1991. This raised much discussion and had the effect of dividing the Board of the Society into

two groups, one in favor of the foundation of a new journal, the other in favor of collaborating with any of the existing human or medical genetic journals published in Europe. The first group was in the majority on the Board but, because of the importance of the issue, it was decided in the summer of 1991 to poll the Society on this point. Again, the majority of the members were in favor of a new journal. The Board of the Society then decided to go ahead with the plan and I was assigned the task of contacting various publishers, whose offers were presented in a comparative table, as well as in the form of detailed contracts, to the Congress of the Society in Elsinore in 1992. Clearly the offer from Karger was the most advantageous for the Society and it was therefore selected by the Board for presentation to the General Assembly. It was evident that the Board had done a very good job, but the time allocated in the programme of the Congress for the General Assembly was only 1 h. In spite of our good intentions, we were thus obliged to 'railroad' the issue of the foundation of the journal in approximately half an hour with very little discussion. It was an awkward situation, and I remember very well a bold declaration opposing the foundation of the journal made by a colleague who later

became one of its most enthusiastic supporters. The fact of the matter was that there was not enough time for discussion, so that most members were left with the impression that a very undemocratic procedure had been used for passing this resolution in the General Assembly.

In the fall of 1992, the first issue of the journal, which I had prepared with great care, was published and was received with favor by everyone. The railroading of the Board's decision in the General Assembly was soon forgotten (or perhaps forgiven) by the members of the Society. A few months later, the episode I have just described came back to mind when I attended the business meeting of the American Society of Human Genetics (ASHG) in which the members were discussing the possible cancellation of the contract (already signed by the Society) which was binding the ASHG to having one of its subsequent annual meetings in New Orleans. Most members were in favor of this cancellation, as a warning to the Senate of the State of Louisiana which was ready to pass a very conservative antiabortion law. The cancellation of the contract would have meant, however, a penalty of US \$ 1 mil-

lion for the ASHG and the Board of the Society had voted against this possibility, since it would have represented an enormous financial burden. I was impressed by the fact that the membership was going through the same excruciating, long discussions which had clearly taken place in the Board only 24 h before, to eventually reach the same conclusion. As a result, the membership decided to honour the contract and a strong letter of protest was sent to the State Senate of Louisiana. Episodes like this indicate the type of interaction going on between the Board and the members of the ASHG who can really participate fully in the decision-making process, whenever they want to. This can and should happen in the business meetings of our Society too, if we extend the time allotted for the Annual General Assembly beyond the quick 1 h allocated until now.

I consider this simple recommendation, to give the ESHG members ample opportunity to express their opinions, as the most important message I can leave to my ESHG colleagues following the work I have done in these past 5 years for our Society and our journal.