

Embargoes on science?

Researchers should know more than has been disclosed about the symbiotic relationship between the places where they publish and the general press.

THE *New England Journal of Medicine*, with *The Lancet* one of the most effective research journals as well as a means of keeping physicians in touch with medical research, seems have stumbled into an uncharacteristically undignified quarrel with an even more successful communications agency — the Reuters news agency. The row is entertaining: public rows usually bring out the unexpected in the participants. But some of the issues raised are also instructive for the scientific community as a whole.

The circumstances are these. The journal (henceforth *NEJM*) distributes copies of each weekly issue to selected journalists and periodicals on the written understanding that no reference is made to the contents until the formal date of publication, by which time the issue is safely in the mails and in the hands of at least some of its subscribers. In January this year, a Reuters journalist put on his agency's wires a news item about a research study suggesting that ordinary aspirin taken every other day can help people to avoid heart attacks. Sadly for the journalist, his agency and everybody concerned, the authentic account was due to appear in that week's *NEJM*. Reuters was told that the privilege of its advance copy would be withdrawn for six months, and was asked to give a more solemn form of the usual undertaking before the privilege could be restored. Reuters, saying that its reporter had learned what he wrote about aspirin and heart attack without seeing the relevant copy of the *NEJM*, declined to give the undertaking asked for. It will presumably now be medically less well-read.

Readers may be surprised to know about these advance copies, but *NEJM* is not the only journal that follows this practice. So, too, does *Nature*. Most general journals that offer their contributors wide readership follow some practice of this kind, always on the understanding that no use will be made of advance material before publication. One objective, often quoted, is that it gives journalists much-needed time in which to prepare stories intended for general consumption. Another, less often acknowledged, is that the practice puts all interested journalists on an equal footing, so that individual reporters in science or medicine are freed from the need to determine what they write about by the knowledge of what their rivals have already written, which gives the journals the benefit that their contents are likely to be noticed in writing by more periodicals than would otherwise have done so. Evidently the breaking of the embargo undermines this mutually beneficial arrangement.

Researchers should know that these practices constrain them

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as well as reporters; contributors to *Nature*, for example, are told when their articles are accepted for publication that it is a pre-condition that there should be no pre-publicity for their work. It is also common knowledge that many journals reject that approach. The American Physical Society, for example, on behalf of its several excellent journals, has taken the line that contributors can seek whatever advance publicity they choose for their discoveries, largely on the grounds that research which is mostly paid for by taxpayers should be freely accessible as soon as possible. The American Physical Society has even offered to help those looking for publicity find a way of doing so.

Each of these positions is, of course, tenable, but on a different ground. One calculation that stands out is that the journals insisting that pre-publicity by their contributors is against the rules must of course be sensibly flexible about their interpretation of what the rules imply. People who talk at meetings at which journalists happen to be present cannot (and should not) avoid spilling the beans; journalists smart enough to recognize what is being said are entirely within their rights to make what use they wish of what they learn. The embargo on pre-publicity becomes a kind of formality. It is a different matter when a contributor supplements what he has to say at a meeting by thrusting copies of his paper into the hands of journalists or when he sends the essence of his latest contribution to a reporter at one journal before he has had the time to send the whole of it to the journal in which he would like to see it preserved for the rest of time (one of *Nature's* recent trials) — or when a contributor's university press department chooses to put out a statement on the subject in advance of publication.

Most journals are flexible and forgiving in their way of dealing with the issues that inevitably arise in operating such a policy. How can it be otherwise, when one of their interests is their own advantage, not just the general well-being? Fairness also becomes an issue. There are indeed occasions when enterprising journalists are able to steal a march on the more specialist press, which is generally to be welcomed. Indeed, the journals that look askance at newspapers which beat them in speed of publication had better quickly recognize that there is a kind of inbuilt logic in the diurnal rhythm that they cannot loftily ignore.

It must also be confessed that there are also occasions when it seems that the gun has been jumped implausibly. Some of the tales that are told are even on the unbelievable side of the implausible. People will sometimes say that it is not their fault that an account of an article appearing in, say *Nature* appeared before it should have done because of an oversight by an editor. (More commonly, people explain that it was not they who forget to mention the source of their inspiration, but that of the person who sent their copy to the printer.) But these excuses are neither common nor persistent. Most journalists seem aware of the benefits of the system. So, mostly, do the journals. Maybe, on this occasion, the *NEJM* has been a little heavy-handed, at least in its assertion that its chief concern is to avoid the situation that may arise when patients learn of new treatments from a news article before their physicians have had a chance to read the authentic version. Are physicians that diligent, or the mails that good? □