

nature chemical biology

To the editor

Correspondence in scientific journals is an essential mechanism for mediating scientific debates, but emerging online technologies offer new ways to foster scientific communication.

As chemical biology draws researchers from across traditional disciplines, there is a need for a central place where chemical biologists can participate in scientific debate and exchange emerging ideas. The Correspondence section of *Nature Chemical Biology* serves such a purpose for the chemical biology community by offering a venue to comment on papers previously published by the journal and to present ideas of general interest. However, as new web technologies make it easier for chemical biologists to interact in real time, we should reconsider the role of Correspondence in the print edition of the journal to take full advantage of new media.

The primary aim of our Correspondence section is to provide a forum for readers to engage in scholarly debate about original research papers that have appeared in *Nature Chemical Biology*. A scientific paper presents a snapshot of our understanding of a research area at a particular moment. However, science advances through the ongoing revision of hypotheses that are supported by new data, some of which may contradict the results of earlier studies. Despite rigorous peer review, disputes related to existing papers may arise, and evenhanded scientific mechanisms for adjudicating such disagreements are essential. Though conference discussions and future publications provide mechanisms to present scientific controversies, the Correspondence section of journals offers a peer-reviewed comment-response process for readers and authors to openly discuss concerns specific to a published manuscript.

When is a Correspondence in *Nature Chemical Biology* the appropriate venue for a scientific discussion? We believe that scientific disputes are best resolved by cooperation among the involved scientists. As a result, we encourage readers who have scientific concerns about a published paper to first contact the original authors directly and try to resolve the matter. In many cases, scientific discrepancies may result from differences in experimental conditions or other variables that are easily resolved by exchanging materials or by collaboration. However, we also feel that it is our responsibility to provide timely information to the chemical biology community regarding scientific concerns with the papers we have published. Thus, we invite Correspondence after independent efforts have not provided a satisfactory resolution.

What is the editorial process for handling Correspondence at *Nature Chemical Biology*? Commenting authors are asked to submit a 250- to 300-word statement and a figure including original data describing their concerns (see our guidelines at http://www.nature.com/nchembio/authors/article_types/index.html). Those submissions that meet our editorial criteria for Correspondence (see below) are sent to the authors of the original paper, who are given an opportunity to provide a written reply. The comment and the author response are then sent to referees who usually include, but need not be limited to, the reviewers of the original manuscript. These experts are asked to comment on the scientific merits

of the Correspondence and to provide their opinions on the appropriateness and general interest of the submissions. Based on referee feedback, the editorial team makes a decision about whether the Correspondence should be published, and if so, the team works with the authors to finalize the text.

How do editors judge whether or not a Correspondence should be considered for publication? At submission, we consider two main questions: (i) are the main results and conclusions of the published paper challenged, and (ii) are important new data included to support the critical comment? Correspondences that provide no new data or that refute a paper's claims by citation of the scientific literature are not generally considered further, nor are comments that confirm or extend the conclusions of papers already published or that escalate ongoing debates. We also assess whether the main themes and technical points are likely to be of interest to a broad readership of chemical biologists and bear directly on the main conclusions of the published work. We take into account the amount of time that has passed since publication of the original paper, whether follow-up papers have already appeared in the literature and whether we have other comments on the paper under consideration. Finally, criticisms of papers published elsewhere are not appropriate for the Correspondence section of *Nature Chemical Biology*; authors are encouraged to submit correspondence to the journal that published the original paper or to develop their thesis into a complete study appropriate for submission as an original research manuscript.

Letters to the Editor need not be limited to criticism of published papers. An important second function of Correspondence at *Nature Chemical Biology* is to publish comments that will be of interest to the chemical biology community, including discussions of the broader implications of published papers (*Nat. Chem. Biol.* **3**, 435, 2007) or interesting insights into scientific research, funding or education (*Nat. Chem. Biol.* **3**, 352, 2007). Although these comments will continue to appear as Correspondence, they are increasingly being expressed online through blogs, commenting functionality and social networks, which provide environments for more interactive 'real time' exchanges among scientists.

We believe that correspondence serves an essential purpose in the advancement of science, and so the question becomes how new web technologies can further enhance scientific interaction and debate. We are interested in what *Nature Chemical Biology* readers think. What types of correspondence warrant publication in print? Would you value the ability to comment on or 'rate' papers online? Should we create a chemical biology blog? What is the best use of online social networking to foster scientific discussion? We invite you to join us at the Nature Publishing Group chemistry blog "The Sceptical Chymist" (<http://blogs.nature.com/thescpticalchymist/>) to discuss these and other questions related to correspondence and the future of online scientific communication. ■