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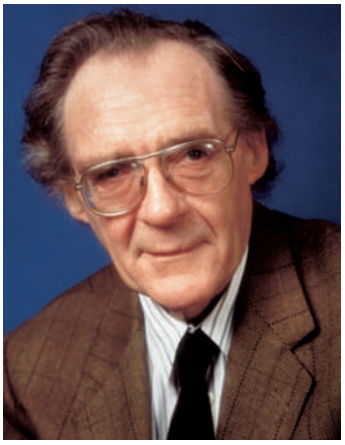
John Maddox 1925–2009

In memory of a transformative editor of *Nature*.



It was with great sadness that I and my colleagues at *Nature* learned of the death on Sunday of Sir John Maddox — or 'JM', as his colleagues always referred to him.

There was puzzlement, too. Yes, John had been looking frail recently, but, well, this was JM — the perpetually restless, irresistible, unstoppable force. The editor who conducted some gatherings with 'shock and awe' as some recall. The 'man with a whim of iron' as others used to call him. And the man who survived countless cigarettes and glasses of red wine, many consumed late into the night as he wrote the week's Editorials at the last possible moment.

Full tributes to him will appear in next week's issue (see www.nature.com/jm), but it is appropriate promptly to recall (JM never split an infinitive) some of the highlights of his time at *Nature*. He first took the reins as the editor of *Nature* in 1966. He was the fourth editor — the journal was founded in 1869, and his predecessors had lengthy stints, the first, Norman Lockyer, being in charge for 50 years. John served until 1973, when he was succeeded by David Davies. He then returned in 1980, and I succeeded him in December 1995.

It was during his first stint that he laid the foundations for *Nature* as it is today. Importantly (JM liked to start sentences with adverbs), he threw aside the highly informal and somewhat crony-based system for selecting papers and established a system of peer review. A characteristically readable account of this can be found in his valedictory Essay in his last issue (see *Nature* **378,** 521–523; 1995).

This move was not without his own reservations — he liked to say that the 1953 paper on the structure of DNA would never have passed peer review. He never lost his distrust of such refereeing as an obstacle to the truly original, and occasionally dispensed with it altogether during his first stint as editor.

He also established a strong tradition of journalism in *Nature*. John was a man of many parts but above all he was a journalist, and took pride both in the label and in the craft. He had trained and researched as a physicist, he had an all-consuming intellect, he absorbed research as fast as he could read it — and he was a virtuoso science writer, coming to *Nature* with substantial experience as a newspaper science correspondent. Many leading writers and editors in today's science media passed through *Nature* during his time, and learned above all how to recognize and seize moments of editorial opportunity even if, many a time, flying by the seat of one's pants. He established the 'voice of *Nature*' in unsigned Editorials (although the voice was often unmistakably his own). And he led the way in developing extensive supplements in which he reported and opined over many pages, often compelling in their narrative, his penetrating perceptions of the state of science and its leadership in this country or that.

So for what else, apart from clouds of cigarette smoke, will John be remembered? Recollections that I have heard from readers over the years include his championing of a research agenda even before many of those in the field had recognized it. Others recall controversial decisions and opinions that were even offensive to some but which, to others more detached from the fray, 'added to the gaiety of nations'. Many who knew him personally will remember a dry and incisive wit, alongside a strong streak of human kindness.

JM was unique, and those of us who knew him and learned from him will feel the world to be a smaller place in his absence. But his was a powerful spirit, and we continue to thrive on it. ■

Philip Campbell
Editor-in-Chief, *Nature*

Healthy outlook

China's first steps towards health care for all will require careful implementation.

On 7 April, the Chinese government formally approved a long-awaited health-care plan. China's nominally communist regime has, until now, left health care to a wildly profit-driven and generally unreliable system that has cut many citizens off from basic medical attention. The new plan commits 850 billion renminbi (US$124 billion) over the next three years to begin correcting that situation, and marks the first concrete step towards a goal of providing health care to all Chinese people by the year 2020.

Among the plan's initiatives are 29,000 new local medical centres and 2,000 new county-level hospitals to reach more rural Chinese; additional training for 1.37 million village-level and 160,000 community-level doctors; a requirement that all doctors spend a year in rural areas; an overhaul of the insurance system; and caps on drug prices. Also, in an effort to make the health-care enterprise more efficient, the plan includes a revamp — or, in many cases, an introduction — of a medical record-keeping system using modern information technology.

Many of these initiatives could have important pay-offs for research into, and control of, infectious diseases. For example, an effective medical-records system could greatly improve the monitoring of emerging diseases such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and avian flu, as well as ongoing epidemics

such as HIV and tuberculosis. As things stand now, the data have sizable gaps at the local level. Also helpful will be the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's pledge on 1 April to provide US$33 million to help China's local doctors improve diagnoses of tuberculosis and distinguish between normal and multidrug-resistant strains of the disease.

The government's plan aims to get local physicians up to speed on basic medical care and record keeping. This should make it easier to carry out large-scale clinical trials in rural China, and so help the country realize its potential for translational research. China has perhaps the most diverse disease profile in the world, with huge numbers of patients in various disease categories.

Any plan of such a scale inevitably has its shortcomings and its critics. For example, there is concern that it could stifle drug discovery. Under the plan, the government will produce and distribute medicines deemed to be 'essential', probably based on a list of 300–400 drugs recommended by the World Health Organization. But by depriving some Chinese pharmaceutical companies of income, the regulation could run counter to the government's efforts to stimulate a nearly moribund new-drug industry. (Defenders of the plan have countered that most truly new drugs won't be included on this list, so that the plan will not discourage innovation.)

Perhaps the greatest missed opportunity is the plan's failure to end the practice of doctors and hospitals adding a 15% fee for drugs that they prescribe. This practice has contributed to widespread over-prescription of drugs, which in turn encourages drug-resistant strains of disease. The plan does call for caps on how much doctors can prescribe for a given illness, and how much a hospital can make from medicines. But that is unlikely to stop them from over-prescribing to meet those limits, or even manipulating figures to expand the limits.

Like every aspect of the new health-care plan, preventing such abuse will require close monitoring at the local level, something that the Chinese leadership has often found difficult. Nonetheless, the initiative has covered an enormous distance in its first step, and will probably be remembered as a landmark in Wen Jiabao's premiership — a period in which China's obsession with all things profitable has given way to a greater concern for the average person. ■

A magnificence to share

Tourism in the Antarctic needs to be regulated, but should not be banned.

Although some will always prefer more cosmopolitan pleasures, there is no denying that, to many, the unspoilt wilderness has a perennial attraction. Shelley captured the appeal well:

> I love all waste
> And solitary places; where we taste
> The pleasure of believing what we see
> Is boundless, as we wish our souls to be

Perennial though this desire is, it is also paradoxical. The lure of the wilderness depends to a large part on the absence of humans — and its experience depends on the presence of at least one, and normally more. Few go into the wild alone.

These poetic passions are spurring debate in Baltimore, Maryland, where the signatories of the Antarctic Treaty are celebrating the 50th anniversary of that agreement by holding their first joint meeting with the Arctic Council. The two-week meeting ends on 17 April. Antarctica is the planet's greatest wilderness, and the number of people wanting to visit it increases every year. Growing global affluence — even in these recessionary times — means that more and more can do so. The continent, once the preserve of expeditions whose numbers were counted in dozens, now sees almost 50,000 tourists a season, and the numbers look set to rise.

This poses both practical and ideological problems. Antarctica is a long way from anywhere — that's part of the point — and its waters can be treacherous. Tour vessels get into trouble there with some regularity, and have to be rescued by ships, aircraft and personnel that have been diverted from their mission to support Antarctic science. Moreover, although the continent is vast, tourists often go to only a few places, thus concentrating their impact on the extremely fragile ecosystem.

For these reasons, the United States has proposed that the Antarctic Treaty be amended to discourage large tour vessels, and to allow no more than 100 people to go ashore at any one time. Such an amendment, which would codify the practices already followed by responsible tour operators — although not by everyone in the business — should indeed be adopted. This cold earth, more so even than Earth in general, needs to be trod on lightly, and there is a compelling need for regulations to ensure that is the case. No one wants to see penguins begging for food like pizza-scavenging racoons in Yosemite.

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But the regulations need to focus on impacts — including effects on scientific activities of high value — rather than on total numbers per se. For small and delicate places such as the Galapagos Islands it may make sense to argue, as the Galapagos Conservation Trust does, that every tourist should limit him or herself to a single visit, thus maximizing the number of unique human experiences for a given level of tourism. But Antarctica is far from small. If people want to go there, and they travel responsibly, they should be allowed and even encouraged. The snobbishness that some nature lovers fall prey to — it's for me and my soul-achingly deep appreciation, not hoi polloi — should be resisted. The fact that so many people care so much for natural beauty that they will go literally to the end of the Earth for it is a fine thing; it should be celebrated and indulged as much as is practical.

Purists for whom this will be desecration should start making plans to visit the yet more inhospitable wildernesses of the Moon. If they hurry they may get there before Richard Branson opens a hotel. ■