

# Stealing success

D.E. Koshland

## The EMBO Journal.

Editor-in-chief Bernhard Hirt, executive editor John Tooze.

IRL. 12/yr. £155, \$310.

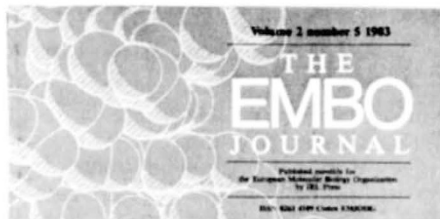
AT FIRST glance, biological journals appear to be in need of birth control. We are heading for an era of 'one gene — one journal'. John Tooze and the Council of the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO) were well aware of the objections to yet another journal before embarking on this new publication but they decided that the positive aspects outweighed the negative. I believe they were right. *The EMBO Journal* has the potential of a fine publication that is here to stay.

Modern research is so specialized that I questioned whether my individual judgment was enough and so asked four colleagues in a wide diversity of areas (but all molecular biologists) for their comments. They were unanimous — the issues contain excellent articles from excellent laboratories. One frequent comment was revealing: "our library should subscribe", a compliment in regard to the quality of articles and a reflection that *The EMBO Journal* is still not widely read in the USA. But I believe it will be, and should be, as it has begun well and should attract contributors and readers.

The format and print are similar to *Cell* (methods at the end). The mode of refereeing and article length are similar, but not identical, to the *PNAS*. Articles can be sponsored by members of EMBO (approximately 500 distinguished scientists). Their ability to say "No" to friends on occasion will determine the ultimate quality of the journal as it matures. A few articles of classical biochemistry are evident, but they are the exception and this follows the intent of EMBO which indicated clearly that the "new molecular biology" was the target area. The articles are short (six pages maximum) and published rapidly (goal — four months).

As I have some responsibilities in the *PNAS*, I responded to the *Nature* solicitation for this review by pleading conflict of interest. I was told that they believed I should surmount my baser instincts. It is true that this new journal will compete with its two US counterparts and I may subliminally hope that it will ultimately be "almost as good as the *PNAS*". In fact, this new journal may help relieve the pressure on its older predecessors. Since *Cell* and the *PNAS* have not become any slimmer in the period in which *The EMBO Journal* and other newcomers have arrived on the scene, it means that the truly miraculous output of the current 'Golden Age of Biology' needs the added journal capacity to accommodate it.

This output and its pressure to induce new publications astonishes some but it should not. Any comparison of current papers with those of the 'good old days' shows that there are more publications now



and they are packed with more data. Molecular approaches have become the 'lingua franca' of modern biology and this new publication, like its counterparts, includes disciplines spanning from chemical pathways to neurobiology. They contain more data because automation and commercial

suppliers have replaced much of the drudgery and time-consuming aspects of this research. The result is that a journal can spring full blown from the head of the EMBO Council and have more than enough contributors to fill its pages. That its contributors are largely European is appropriate and logical but I hope that the international friendship of science will be preserved with manuscripts flowing across the Atlantic in both directions.

Virtually everything, good and bad, eventually gets published somewhere. So journal quality is in the long run a device for optimizing the readers' time. The busy scientist likes to believe that one can read a few journals and keep abreast of the cutting edge of one's discipline. That assumption has some statistical validity and some self-delusion. Nevertheless, my truly objective evaluation of journal quality is the percentage of time they are 'stolen' from the library. *The EMBO Journal* has been sired by an organization with high standards, is off to an excellent start and should join the illustrious ranks of those journals with a high theft rate. □

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## DNA evolving

Tim Harris

### DNA—A Journal of Molecular Biology.

Editor-in-chief John D. Baxter.

Mary Ann Liebert. 4/yr. \$120 US;

elsewhere \$136 (surface), \$152 (air).

THE advent of recombinant DNA techniques has led not only to a proliferation of DNA sequences but also of new journals in which to publish them. One such is *DNA—A Journal of Molecular Biology* published by Mary Ann Liebert, who are comparatively new to journal publication, but who already produce a number of immunological journals and the well known biotechnology newspaper *Genetic Engineering News*.

The first issue of *DNA* appeared as a 'take home' at the 1st Annual Congress for Recombinant DNA Research in 1981 and contained, in addition to original articles, some of the abstracts of the meeting. This somewhat unusual feature has been retained, the abstracts of the 2nd and 3rd Congress appearing in subsequent issues along with more original articles and some reviews.

Like the molecule itself *DNA* seems to be evolving. After initial problems (e.g. the title of the journal has been changed at least twice) the editorial board has been revamped and now sports an impressive array of molecular biologists and gene cloners. The scope of the journal too, has been enlarged to cover "any subject

dealing with eukaryotic or prokaryotic gene structure, organization, expression or evolution", rather than "the application of recombinant DNA to gene structure and function". This means that the journal inevitably overlaps, instead of complementing, existing established molecular biology journals such as *Cell*, *Journal of Molecular Biology*, *Nucleic Acids Research* and *Gene*. Consequently, the only way the journal will flourish will be to attract high quality papers.

Clearly, some good papers have been published already although with a distinct Californian bias. The unexpectedly fast speed of publication, particularly for a journal published quarterly, may help to continue the trend and attract a wider circle of contributors. The fast publication time however, is not without some disadvantages, as far as presentation is concerned, the paper itself being more suitable for use in Southern blots than for printing on. Nevertheless, it is the quality of the data rather than the reproduction of it that is of prime importance and on these criteria the new journal has not done too badly so far.

If the journal maintains the speed of publication, improves the quality of production and appears monthly (as is the intention) then the average molecular biologist will have to consult it on a regular basis, rather than scanning the contents page through *Current Contents*. □

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