

# John Maddox 1925–2009

In memory of a transformative editor of *Nature*.

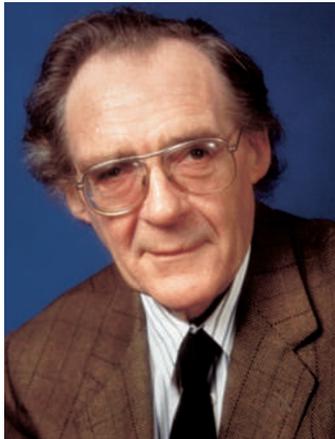
It was with great sadness that I and my colleagues at *Nature* learned of the death on Sunday of Sir John Maddox — or ‘JM’, as his colleagues always referred to him.

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](http://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