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What's our purpose?

This may seem a very strange question to be asking of a scientific journal now 3 years old and with very clearly defined aims and scope. Sometimes I get to listen to programmes on the BBC radio, such as the series 'The life scientific'; they are all very interesting even if the subjects are somewhat removed from our area of expertise. However, listening to what is going on in other scientific disciplines can often raise questions in one's mind which are relevant to matters that concern this journal.

One such programme featured the work of Sir Ian Chalmers, Director of the Cochrane Collaboration (a not-for-profit organization) which brings together some 30 000 doctors, researchers and most importantly patients, to ensure unbiased access to effective healthcare interventions. Sir Ian trained as a medical doctor, but after working in the Middle East, he returned to question everything he had been trained to do. The result was that he has become to be described as the 'Maverick master of medical evidence'. He now champions the use of the best available evidence and considers that patient concerns rather than academic interests should drive the medical research agenda.

Listening to the programme, two themes emerged in my mind, both of which were relevant to our own scientific discipline. The first was the need to share *all* available evidence, not just information which was considered to be important or valid. Sir Ian's example was an experimental drug that was administered to volunteers in a medical trial. The trial went badly wrong and the patients suffered significant and permanent damage to their immune systems. It later emerged that a previous trial had indicated the possible dangers of using a very similar drug, but researchers considered that; in view of the negative results, this particular line of development was a dead end and it was not reported or published.

Sir Ian was not seeking to apportion blame but his example did get me wondering about the whole approach that we use to publish scientific studies. A key requirement that we have is that the work should be peer reviewed so that we can have some assurance as to its originality and validity. Such things are very right and proper in a scientific discipline, though I began to wonder if our strict approach sometimes means that 'interesting' or important observations may be missed because the observer does not report them to a wider audience for various reasons. In the case of Sir Ian Chalmers' example, this led to life-threatening problems for some patients and who knows there may be similar cases involving food safety.

As I thought more about the issue, I actually became slightly less worried because of activities such as the MoniQA Network of Excellence which involves a great deal of sharing of data and information regarding all aspects of food safety. As you all know, MoniQA has been an active supporter of QAS since its launch and provided a significant contribution to its content. The international spread of the MoniQA participants has provided and will continue to provide many opportunities to share data and information in both formal and informal environments, and that can only be good news for food manufacturers and consumers.

The other theme which emerged from Sir Ian's comments was the difference between data and information. Now this is something that did strike dear to my heart as readers of my editorials will recognize. As we begin to gain knowledge and develop our expertise, then we become 'experts' to whom others turn to for advice. In these circumstances, it is important that we keep up-to-date by accessing the latest data and ideas on our chosen subject area, and of course QAS and other relevant publications play important roles in achieving those aims, along with direct communication with our colleagues. A key role for experts is to be able to 'translate' the data obtained from scientific study into 'information' for consumption by non-specialists; that is perhaps another way of saying that data have limited value if they cannot be used by others. I am not suggesting that all scientific studies should have an immediately practical outcome, not least because in many cases a study is just one part of a very large jigsaw and it may be years before it becomes a part of a practical application. However, I would suggest that when many of us set out to publish our work, we sometimes fail to critically ask ourselves 'What's our purpose in carrying out this work?' and in failing to ask the question, we sometimes lose sight of our objectives for doing the work in the first place. Objectives should always be clear in our minds when we sit down and write our research work, and they are often very

instructive when finishing the task to make sure that we have tried to address questions about the potential application of the knowledge we have generated.

We live in an increasingly complex world with increasingly global problems. As global trade in food products and commodities increases, so do the associated food safety and quality risks; we need to stay alert and above all communicate with one another and the wider non-scientific community. A key role for QAS is through publication to help in the development of the right tools to protect the safety and quality of crops and foods, and I hope that we continue to serve that purpose.

If you have any ideas how we can better meet our defined objectives and the methods we use to communicate with readers of QAS and beyond, then we would be pleased to hear them. How about a letter to the editors?

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