

Under New Management A Six-Month Progress Report on *Circulation Research*

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The editorship of *Circulation Research* was transferred to us on July 1, 1999. The new editors would like to review the directions that the journal has taken in this time, now that 6 months of data are available. Such an evaluation is particularly timely given that the transition was not merely an editorial one: we deliberately seized the opportunity to implement fundamental changes in the process, notably:

- An editorial commitment to decisive action and clear communication
- All-electronic manuscript management from receipt in the editorial office to transmission to the publisher
- New efforts to maximize information content on the printed page, including the use of online supplements for extended methods and miscellaneous supporting information
- Institution of two new electronic manuscript formats: UltraRapid Communications, in which high-priority manuscripts are reviewed very quickly and published online within 1 month of acceptance, and Research Commentaries, peer-reviewed technical comments on work that has appeared in *Circulation Research*
- Adoption of a manuscript triage process whereby noncompetitive or inappropriate manuscripts (comprising about 10% of overall submissions) are identified early in the process, enabling rapid feedback to the authors

Meanwhile, the underlying editorial philosophy has been to do what we can to make *Circulation Research* the preferred venue for fundamental cardiovascular discovery and translational research. As a corollary, we have consciously sought to maintain balance among the important modern disciplines, including a commitment to nurture the well-established prominence of the journal in vascular biology.

The data indicate that we have made significant progress toward our goals. Figure 1A shows that the overall acceptance rate for original articles in *Circulation Research*, in the first 6 months of our editorship, equaled 22%. This acceptance rate reflects only final decisions; less than 3% of manuscripts are accepted at the time of first decision. The

vast majority of the manuscripts that we eventually publish are initially identified as worthy of reconsideration after revision; few manuscripts in which revision is discouraged end up being accepted. The low acceptance rate reflects the reality of limited page budgets as well as a conscious effort by the editors to select manuscripts that are not only outstanding scientifically but also that have broad appeal to the diverse readership of the journal.

Fostering that diversity means maintaining a judicious balance between studies that address problems of the vasculature versus those of the heart itself. Under its previous editorship, *Circulation Research* became a balanced vascular-cardiac journal. To determine whether this remains true in the new regime, we have examined separately the acceptance rates and submission rates for the two disciplines. When decisions are broken down into vascular biology manuscripts versus those in other disciplines, the acceptance rates are comparable, with vascular biology coming out slightly higher (Figure 1A). Meanwhile, almost half of the original manuscripts that have been received by the Baltimore office have been vascular biology studies (Figure 1B). In summary, the data reveal that vascular biology continues to thrive at *Circulation Research*.

Our commitment to decisive action, taking full advantage of electronic opportunities to enhance efficiency, has yielded dramatic results. We are particularly proud of our record in accelerating the manuscript review process. The average time from submission to first decision now equals a scant 3 weeks; Figure 2 shows the breakdown among manuscript categories, which is notable for brevity in all subsets but especially so for UltraRapid Communications. While partly attributable to the efficiency of electronic communication, two new editorial measures have helped to decrease the times to first decision even more. First, the editors now read manuscripts upon submission in an effort to identify those that are either inappropriate for our journal or clearly noncompetitive. We often seek the advice of one or more external reviewers, generally members of the Editorial Board, in making this triage decision. Manuscripts identified early on as noncompetitive or inappropriate are rejected without full review, generally within 1 week of submission. We currently reject 10% of submissions in this manner; given our acceptance rate of only 22%, the editors may decide to increase this triage fraction over the coming months. Second, the editors now routinely read each review soon after it has been submitted. This departure from the usual practice of waiting until the manuscript file is "complete" enables us to identify manuscripts of low (or high) priority early in the review process. Such manuscripts are then reexamined by the editors; if

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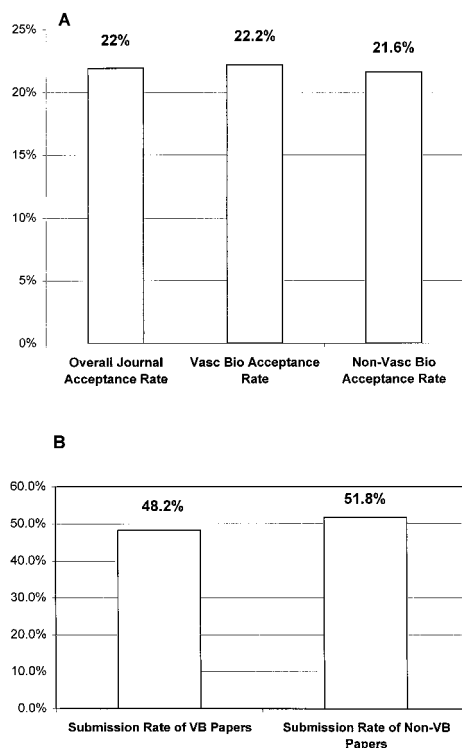


Figure 1. A, Comparative acceptance rates for manuscripts in the vascular biology (22.2%) and nonvascular biology (21.6%) fields. The average acceptance rate for the journal is equal to 22%. B, Outline of the submission rates for manuscripts, again in vascular biology (48.2%) and nonvascular biology (51.8%) fields.

appropriate, the remaining reviewers are given a final opportunity to respond, and an early decision is rendered. In either the triage or the early-decision process, at least two individuals (two editors and usually one or more external reviewers) see the manuscript and contribute to the final decision. These measures not only enable rapid feedback to authors but also provide some relief for our referees from their reviewing burdens.

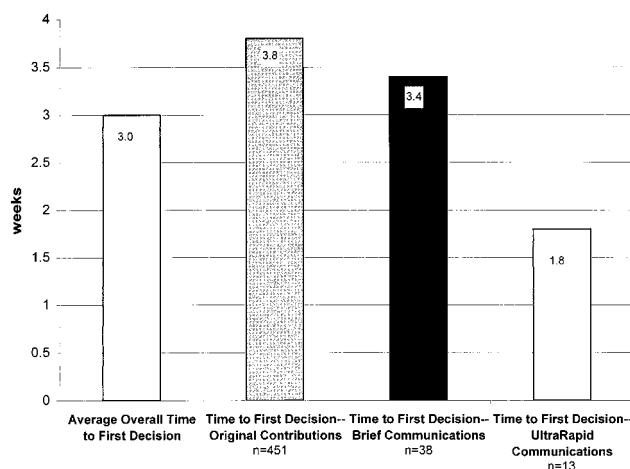


Figure 2. Average time to first decision for the overall journal is 3 weeks (21 calendar days). For individual manuscript categories, time to first decision is 3.8 weeks for original contributions (n=451 manuscripts), 3.4 weeks for Brief Communications (n=38 manuscripts), and 1.8 weeks for UltraRapid Communications (n=13 manuscripts).

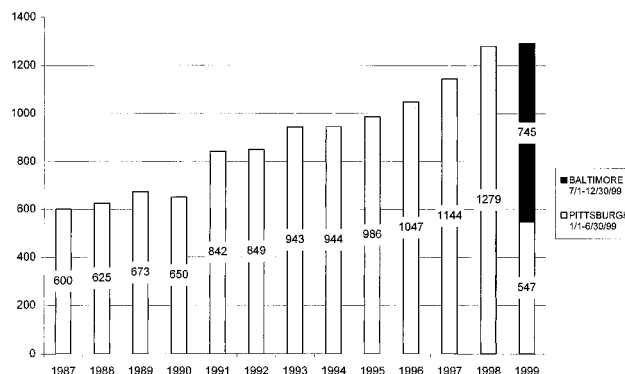


Figure 3. Number of manuscripts received chronologically has been tracked over 13 years, from 1987 to 1999. For the last 6-month period under the previous editorship (first half of 1999), 547 manuscripts were received in the Pittsburgh editorial office. For the first 6 months of our editorship (second half of 1999), 745 manuscripts were received in the Baltimore editorial office.

These advances have been achieved despite a substantial increase in the pace of submissions to the journal since the transition. Figure 3 plots the number of submitted manuscripts over the last 13 years. The bar for 1999 shows continued growth in overall submissions over previous years. The additional chronological breakdown of that bar, in which the 6-month Baltimore volume is shown on top, reveals a 26% increase after July 1, 1999. At the current pace, we expect to handle more than 1500 new manuscripts in the year 2000.

The two new categories of online-only articles deserve some comment. We now have enough experience with UltraRapid Communications to be confident that this new format is here to stay. UltraRapids now account for about 1 of 20 submissions, a popularity that reflects the ease of worldwide Internet access and the growing acceptance of online-only publication. The submission rate speaks to authors' preference; a complementary measure of popularity is the "hit frequency," which identifies readers' preferences. The data here demonstrate superior levels of interest for these high-priority studies. On average, the first several UltraRapids attracted more than 400 hits each, including more than 200 full-text downloads, within the first 3 months after publication. Several UltraRapids have been cited multiple times in other peer-reviewed articles, as well as in the lay press. By any measure, this category is off to a quick and successful start. The second new online category, Research Commentaries, debuts in this issue.^{1,2} These follow the general format of focused technical comments on work that has previously appeared in our journal. Research Commentaries are peer-reviewed; if deemed to be of sufficient interest to merit publication, the authors of the original study are then given a chance to respond. The response is also peer-reviewed. Publication follows the UltraRapid process: abstracts for the Research Commentary and the Response appear in the printed issue, with the e-citation whereby the articles can be referenced.

Finally, the editors acknowledge that this progress would have been impossible without the enthusiastic cooperation of our reviewers. Their buy-in to electronic receipt of manu-

script files and to Web-based review submission has been nothing short of extraordinary. This attitude is remarkable given the learning curve associated with any effort to reinvent the way things are done. We have been acutely aware of the limitations of our nascent Web-based manuscript management system, including glitches in our homegrown software and occasional lapses in server availability. We are very grateful to our referees for their perseverance and for their crucial feedback role in our conversion to an Internet-based process. Having pioneered the process for the American Heart Association (AHA) journals, we are now relieved to announce our editorial office's liberation from the responsibilities of software development and server maintenance. We have recently transferred the system's operations and future development to Medical Support Systems (MSS) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Many of you will recognize MSS as the company that spearheaded the electronic abstract submission

and review process for the AHA. The transfer of our system to MSS represents our commitment, and that of the AHA, to our new way of doing business. Reviewers and authors can now rest assured that an experienced commercial venture will continue upgrading the software and will respond to any user concerns that may arise. You may contact MSS at mss@dbpub.com and, as always, you may reach us at circulation.research@heart.org.

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KEY WORDS: research commentary ■ vascular biology ■ acceptance rate ■ triage process