

Correspondence

Economy

To the Editor: This is a comment on Leslie Rendell-Baker's editorial in the January-February number of ANESTHESIOLOGY. "On the Promise of Economy Denied" may have been written from the point of view of something other than just economy, but if it is really economy in which one is interested, it can be obtained by methods described by Foldes

et al., *Annals of Surgery* 136: 978, 1952 or Weaver *et al.*, *ANESTHESIOLOGY* 16, 57, 1955. No change of equipment is really required.

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Scientific Functions of Editorial Commentary: A Dissent

To the Editor: The significance of an important article published in a professional or scientific journal commonly is underscored by a covering editorial in the same issue. Some journals even utilize the editorial platform to call the attention of their readers to significant articles recently published in other periodicals. Whether the commentary is written by a member of the editorial board or by an invited contributor is immaterial: an aura of authority is conferred by its presence on the editorial pages, which then serves to heighten the impact on the readers of the work reported. Clearly useful, the practice should be continued, although perhaps not as often as in ANESTHESIOLOGY at present. (There is prestige in rarity: even a Nobel-Prize-of-the-Month would soon lose its luster.)

In a diametrically opposite variant of this approach, publication of a controversial article, on a matter deemed inadequately proven but too important to ignore, is balanced by the accompaniment of an editorial verbalizing the dilemma of the editors. An example of such pairing, on the subject of possible nephrotoxicity after methoxyflurane, appeared in the September-October 1966 issue of ANESTHESIOLOGY. Here indeed was courageous discharge of editorial responsibility.

A hybrid synthesis of the above opposites, however, has become a sporadically recurring

theme in ANESTHESIOLOGY. Examples appeared in May-June 1965 on the uptake of ethylene in man, in November-December 1965 on pulmonary compliance in anesthetized man, in March-April 1966 on species differences and computers, and in January-February 1968 concerning experimental results with cyclopropane and halothane on cardiovascular responses. (The last-named lost none of its prestigious quality by being moved from the opening editorial pages to a new location at the crossroads of the journal.) In each case, the invited commentary praised not, but instead itemized the flaws of an original article (or two) already approved for publication by the editorial board.

Here is a curious state of affairs. The writers of these editorials impugn not only the credibility of the authors but also, by inference, the wisdom of the editorial board in accepting the papers in the first place. The reader, meanwhile, finds himself in the quandary of Andy, of the classic radio program "Amos and Andy." When Amos, after a lengthy explanation of the intricacies of an insurance policy, asked "Is that clear?," Andy replied philosophically, "Oh yeah: the big print giveth, and the little print taketh away."

At this point, it would perhaps be useful to recount the processes of editorial review prior to acceptance of a manuscript submitted for

publication in any of the reputable scientific journals. After initial triage, the paper is routed to appropriate specialists on the editorial board for minute, line-by-line scrutiny and detailed critical analysis. In these days of super-specialization, editors frequently enlist the services of outside consultants. Each referee sends his exhaustive critique to the editor-in-chief or the field editor, whichever is appropriate for the particular journal. On the basis of these evaluations and his own judgment, the editor may accept the paper with but minor changes if any, accept it with revisions, or reject it. Unsigned copies of the criticisms of each referee usually are sent to the authors, who then have the options of withdrawing their manuscript, revising it as suggested or, alternatively, rebutting the objections in correspondence with the editor. When all criticisms have been met, the amended manuscript is accepted for publication. The fact of publication itself signifies that the article has been examined in great detail by members and consultants of the editorial board and found worthy of presentation to the readers.

Against this background of understanding, it seems apparent that the instances of negative commentary listed above were all tantamount to referees' criticisms, somewhat elaborated. As such they should properly have been forwarded under editorial anonymity to the authors, who would then have been free to exercise the options enumerated. One of two things would have become obvious immediately. If the objections raised in an invited commentary were valid, the offending paper should have been withdrawn, rendering the commentary superfluous; if the authors were able successfully to repudiate the criticisms, then the commentary, now vitiated, should have been withdrawn. In neither circumstance is there any justification for publication of the commentary itself as such. (There could be no objection, however, to its appearance in the journal at a later date in the "Letters to the Editor" column, with opportunity, of course, for the authors to reply by letter either in the same column or subsequently.) Indeed, it seems highly improper for the guest commentator to speak *in loco editoris*, himself immune from the normal proc-

esses of editorial review. Such occurrences should in future be scrupulously avoided.

What then constitutes valid scientific functions of editorial commentary? The code seems simple: (1) negative remarks are superfluous; (2) laudatory comments are redundant unless the report is an unusually outstanding contribution; and (3) publication of truly controversial articles may be defended.

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF'S NOTE

I thought it would be of interest to both Dr. Mark and our readers to learn the opinions of the Editorial Board on the questions raised in this letter. So here they are, and they represent an interesting diversity of opinion on both Dr. Mark's remarks and on editorial policy in general.

Material, critical or otherwise, submitted by Dr. Mark, has been, in my experience, well written, usually witty, and always showing evidence of considerable thought. Therefore, I enjoy his efforts. Nevertheless, he is no more infallible than the average man or, for that matter, the average editor. For the most part I look on this most recent commentary of Dr. Mark's as merely his opinion of what editorial policy should be, not what the universal laws state it should be. Were he to become editor, it is quite apparent that the number of editorials in this Journal would be curtailed sharply through applying the criteria listed in the last paragraph.

I think he was a little bit hard on the editorials by Eger and Larson, both of which, I felt, did a good job of presenting useful background material relating to difficult subjects, thus giving a better perspective from which to view the original articles. I believe neither of these essays was in the least offensive. I think the same comment could be made about Price's comments in the January-February 1968 commentary, although there may be more justification for the complaint that this is at once a critical and a "criticizing" essay.

Finally, in the author's own words, "Here is a curious state of affairs." I refer to Dr. Mark's own editorial effort in the March-April 1966 issue, which is about as "criticizing" in tone as