

Writing letters to the Singapore Medical Journal: keep 'em comin'!

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The number of letters submitted to the editor of the Singapore Medical Journal (SMJ) has risen this year. 13 letters were published in 2002, nine in 2003, eight in 2004, and 17 in 2005. There is a rich vein of letters on a variety of topics in this issue of the SMJ⁽¹⁻⁶⁾. These letters are interesting, thought-provoking and importantly, add to the character of the SMJ.

The SMJ encourages the submission of letters addressed to the editor. On receipt of a letter, the following points will be considered:

1. What message does the letter convey?
2. Is the letter format appropriate for the SMJ?
3. Does what the author says justify a published communication?

The policy regarding letters to the editor varies among journals. Like most other journals, the vast majority of letters published in the SMJ are comments on previously-published articles. Other usual reasons for writing letters are: communicating reports of interesting cases^(7,8), concisely reporting clinical and investigative data⁽⁹⁾, and floating new hypotheses. Less common purposes include: drawing the readers' attention to important hazards and points of interest or relevance to clinical practice⁽¹⁰⁾, and general comment on the nature or format of the SMJ, healthcare policy or all matters medical^(11,12).

Careful reading of the instructions to authors and examining the correspondence section of recent issues of the SMJ are highly recommended. Doing so will give the letter writer a feel for the scope and style of successfully-published letters. Writers of letters must disclose financial associations and any possible conflict of interest. On acceptance of letters, writers are required to sign a copyright assignment form. Letters should therefore not contain material that has been submitted or published elsewhere. Letters published in the SMJ will appear in Index Medicus, and the full text of the letter will be accessible through the LinkOut feature of PubMed.

Like all manuscripts, every letter undergoes peer-review, albeit a truncated one by the editor, an editorial board member or occasionally, an expert from the panel of reviewers. The processing time for letters is generally shorter than that for other proffered manuscripts. The time between acceptance and publication is also correspondingly reduced, particularly if the subject matter is of general interest or is time-sensitive^(9,11,12).

Brevity is of the utmost importance. SMJ letters usually occupy no more than one journal page, ranging in length from half a page to a maximum of two pages. The writer of the letter should go straight to the point he or she is aiming at, omitting unnecessary description and detail. Each point should be made concisely and separately. Comments should be objective and constructive. Editors almost universally favour succinct communications.

When commenting on a previously-published article, the submitted letter should be directed to the editor, not the original author. The editor acts as an impartial intermediary, particularly in situations of potential conflict. The letter writer should not repeat arguments already fully covered or referenced in the article being commented upon. The letter should raise points not adequately addressed or provide additional information that supports the contentions or work of other authors. The letter may be used to argue a reasoned perspective, but should not be a vehicle for biased opinion. General comments unsubstantiated by reasoned argument are unacceptable. Above all, any criticism should always be courteous, and never rude or condescending.

The SMJ always offers the original authors the opportunity to respond to the letter writer's comments. Approximately one-half of SMJ authors choose to respond. Accepted letters will be published together with the original authors' reply. Rude letters are almost always easier to respond to than polite ones. Do remember that the original authors have the last word and if the criticisms are inappropriate, the letter writer will not have the opportunity to rescind.

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The editor's bottom line: is the information contained in the submitted letter novel or substantial enough to merit publication and is the subject matter of sufficient interest to the journal readership? Trivial comments or minor observations are unlikely to be accepted. The SMJ welcomes letters of quality from readers and will ensure that all submissions are promptly reviewed and if accepted, published with minimal delay. So, keep 'em comin'! **SMJ**

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2006 Best Research Paper Awards

The Singapore Medical Association will be presenting awards for the Best Research Paper published in the SMJ in 2006. All original research papers that are published in the SMJ during the one year period from 1 January 2006 to 31 December 2006 will be considered for this award.

The following are the judging criteria:

- **The paper with the most potential impact on clinical practice**
- **Most rigorous study design/research methodologies**
- **Comprehensive data analysis and balanced discussion**
- **Data interpretation**

Distinguished members of the medical profession will be invited to serve on our panel of judges in selecting the winning papers.

The authors of the winning papers selected by our panel of judges will receive cash prizes for the first, second and third places. Prize winners will also receive a commemorative trophy and certificate.

We thank you for your support of the SMJ. The quality of our journal depends on the quality of your submissions.