Passing the Baton

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In relay, track athletes intensely practice to perfect the baton pass to the next runner. A delay or drop may cost the race. Although the concept of changing hands applies, the metaphor breaks down over the word “baton” when applied to the handoff from editor to editor-elect. The change of editors, itself, involves a steep learning curve involving the mechanics of processing manuscripts in addition to choosing the best from the “near best” to publish.

There have been four editors during the first 50 years, and The Annals of Thoracic Surgery has grown from scratch to processing over 1,600 original scientific articles and a total of approximately 3,700 submissions per year (Ann Thorac Surg 2014;97:S16–21). Submissions reflect the growth of our specialty. During the Ferguson years (1984 to 2000), submissions were processed using paper, postage, and e-mail. Since January 2003, computer processing and the Internet have radically changed the mechanics of the review process but have not changed the process. This précis of the handoff to Dr Alec Patterson, editor-elect, and Kavitha Reinhold, managing editor-in-waiting, outlines the steps taken to ensure a successful launch of the new team.

Our readers do not need the details of these mechanics, but do need to know an outline of the review process; preparations made for the handoff, and the timetable of the changes that will occur.

All of the editorial content of The Annals is reviewed. Original scientific articles (OAs) are the most important content and comprise 70% of the approximately 4,700 pages published each year. The editor begins the review process for original scientific papers (OAs) by assigning 2 to 4 reviewers. This is facilitated by matching the keywords designated by the authors with the same keywords potential reviewers use to define their interests and expertise. At least 1 of the assigned reviewers is a member of the editorial board.

When all reviews are returned, or after 6 weeks if not all are returned, the editor reviews the reviews, “selectively” reviews key sections of the article, and makes the decision to accept, revise, or reject. Acceptance after the first review is rare; revision is requested for 35% to 40%, and the remainder are rejected. Every effort is made to provide the reasons for rejection in the editor’s decision letter or in one or more of the reviews. Similar efforts are made to specify what needs to be added, subtracted, or revised when revision is requested. Although this process requires more time for the reviewers and the editor, the feedback to authors guides them to produce a better paper or to design a better study for a future paper.

In June 2012 the editor realized that the increase in total submissions and OA submissions had become overwhelming and that the review process needed revision if the policy of providing authors specific feedback was to continue. The transition to all-electronic processing of manuscripts, begun in 2003, dramatically increased the number of feature articles by 43% in 1 year and prompted creation of “feature associate editors” to manage the review process for Case Reports, How-To-Do-It articles and Images in Cardiothoracic Surgery. As feature associate editors were recruited, this substantially reduced the workload of the editor and likely improved the selection of accepted articles.

In October 2012, 7 deputy editors were proposed and approved by The Society of Thoracic Surgeons (STS) Board of Directors. Four deputy editors now manage approximately half of the OAs submitted, a feature deputy editor manages half of the 120 to 140 feature articles received each month, and the Continuing Medical Education (CME) deputy editor manages the CME program. The planned deputy editor for special reports proved unnecessary.

The editor, who is responsible to the Board of Directors, reviews all decisions, but changes are rare or minor. This decentralization appears to be working well, because complaints are few and submissions have not been affected. Since this program began, 1,366 articles have been reviewed, and acceptance rate for the deputy editors (29.7%) does not differ from that of the editor (29.9%).

No author welcomes a letter that his or her submitted paper has been rejected without review. Knowing this, the editor rapidly rejected less than 2 to 4 OAs per year until 2013. As part of the effort to concentrate on more publishable articles, the editor began to reject far more papers without review, but made two stipulations: No papers presented at annual meetings were eligible for rejection without review, and each author had to receive an explanation for the abrupt decision. This required that the editor spend sufficient time on the paper to identify reasons and state an explanation for the decision. Preemption of the review process at this stage provided huge time-savings for reviewers and staff.

At the end of September 2014, 213 of 1,366 papers (15.6%) had been rejected without review, and only 3 authors contested the decision. Requests for reconsideration were less than those of rejected reviewed papers. Deputy editors began using this process in 2014, and after
9 months, 64 papers had been rejected without review by deputy editors. The percentage of rapidly rejected papers by the editor is 19.6% and is 10.6% by the deputy editors.

On January 1, 2014, 19,487 individuals were registered at The Annals Web site, which had not been updated since its inception 11 years earlier. A campaign was undertaken at that time to request that all registrants reregister within the following 6 months. By June 30, 6,878 had reregistered, and 93% had indicated their interests and expertise, using up to 50 selections from the keyword list. As of September 30, 7,509 had reregistered and 96% had checked the keyword list. Most of the nonresponders have been purged from the database. The keyword list is updated each January.

The STS Board of Directors wisely decided to create a permanent editorial office at STS headquarters in Chicago. This decision obviates the costs and hassle of changing the managing editor and staff when an editor’s term expires. Space was allocated, architectural drawings were prepared and approved, and construction was completed in the fall and early winter of 2014.

Kavitha Reinhold began work in September and visited the Philadelphia editorial office later that month to observe the myriad steps of the review process and assess the Bench>Press manuscript tracking system. This system, in use for The Annals since 2003, is very comprehensive and versatile, but a bit quirky and nonintuitive in some algorithms. Shortly thereafter, with assistance from STS staff, Dr Patterson and Mrs Reinhold began recruiting and training the team for the new Annals’ office.

The handoff will be formally completed at the STS business meeting later this month in San Diego. Although the old editor is figuratively “put out to pasture,” his job is not yet over. The annual meeting produces approximately 250 OAs (246 in 2014), which would be an overwhelming load for the new team to immediately process. By tradition, the outgoing editorial office manages the review process for these papers and those still in review before the meeting. The new team takes all new submissions immediately after the meeting. The review process of meeting papers is largely completed over the next 3 months, so that by mid-May, reviews are completed for most of the meeting papers and essentially all papers submitted before the handoff. With the baton firmly in hand, the new team is off and running to provide the best possible forum for authors and readers of The Annals of Thoracic Surgery.