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## Print still favored medium for biomedical information

The 91st annual meeting of the Medical Library Association, held May 31–June 6, 1991, in San Francisco, will long be remembered for its provocative and stimulating opening session. Two distinguished physicians, George D. Lundberg II, M.D. and Stephen P. Lock, M.D., editors of the prominent medical journals *The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* and the *British Medical Journal*, respectively, addressed a topic of great importance to health sciences librarianship—the future of biomedical information.

The dialogue begun by the speakers was further augmented by questions posed from a panel of prominent medical librarians, including Rachael Anderson, Ruth Holst, J. Michael Homan, Nina W. Matheson, and Bernie Todd Smith.

Both Lundberg and Lock believe that information, particularly in printed form, is now and will continue to be essential to the advancement of medicine. Lundberg predicted that at the end of this millennium, physicians, medical students, clinical scientists, and allied health workers will continue to receive most of their new medical knowledge from printed periodicals. Alternate forms of information, such as videotapes, CD-ROM, and formal education, will merely supplement rather than supplant traditional methods.

What then is the concern for the future of biomedical information? According to Lundberg, “ethical issues” will determine the real future of scientific information.

Lock agreed, stressing the importance of the integrity of editors and authors. He was more pessimistic about the future, however, believing that “as long as society continues to reward scientists on the basis of the ‘quantity’ of what they publish rather than ‘quality,’ the situation will continue to remain a mess.”

Lundberg and Lock contend that editors and authors must share the ethical responsibility of biomedical information and publication. They maintain that editors of professional publications must be the “conscience of their professions.” Critical areas of concern for both editors and authors include confidentiality, conflicts of interest, the peer review process, corrections and retractions, and instructions to authors.

Lock and Lundberg have initiated procedures to improve the integrity of scientific publication. Two strategies they both emphasize are “peer review” and a greater awareness of “conflict of interest.” Lock believes that “structured abstracts,” which were recently introduced in both the *British Medical Journal* and *JAMA*, will help alleviate some of the fraudulent problems occurring in scientific pub-

lishing. None of these measures guarantee accuracy in scientific publication, but they are a start in the right direction, and they are the best they can do right now. Both editors agreed that “blind reviews” are the next step to pursue. They also maintain that it is the role of an editor to provide a forum for discussion. Editors must be concerned with publishing articles that are “in the public interest” rather than those that are primarily in “self interest.” The medical journal also has an obligation to provide facts, a forum, and to take an editorial position on topics and then “campaign.” This is where editors, according to Lock, can get into trouble: “They must base their campaigns on facts not on emotion.” —*Kathryn Hoffman, Director, University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas Library*

*Ed. note:* Kathryn Hoffman served as the associate chair on the 1991 National Program Committee of the Medical Library Association. ■ ■

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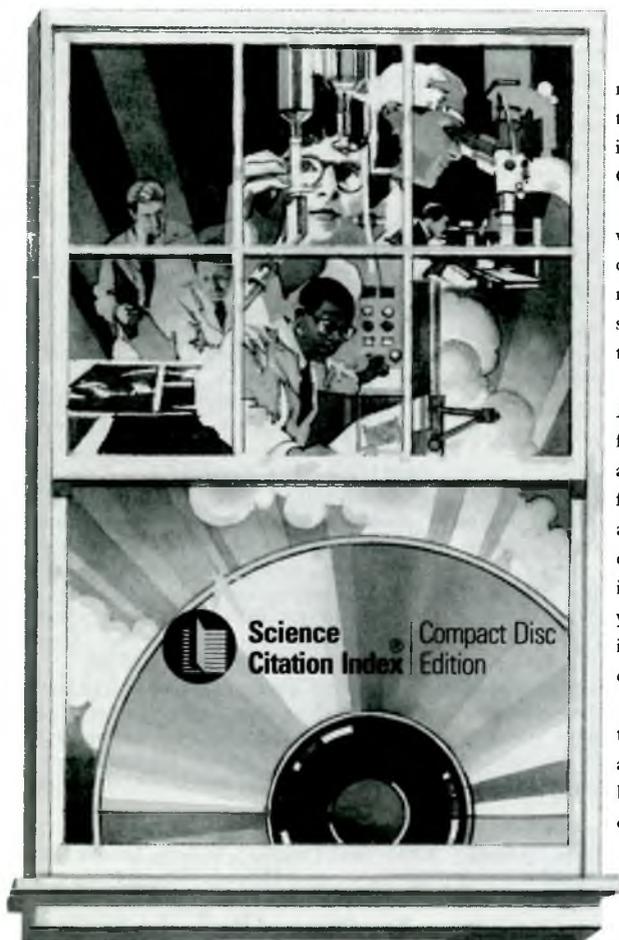
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