Abstracts of Literature: To Be or Not To Be?

Five years ago, Dr. O.M. Reinmuth, then editor-in-chief of Stroke, discontinued the Abstracts of Literature section. In response to many protests from the readers, he immediately reinstituted it.

This year, as the new editor-in-chief, I reviewed the Abstracts of Literature and identified three major reasons for reconsidering its continuation: 1) Abstracts are readily available through computer services, which are likely to be more complete and timely than the Abstracts of Literature. Since we cannot print abstracts of all of the papers published about stroke, the abstracts editor must select a sampling of the most significant papers. Because this is a difficult and subjective task, computer searches may reveal important articles that we missed. Also, since the abstracts must be compiled after the publication dates of other journals, they appear several months later in Stroke than on computer services. 2) The Abstracts of Literature section is expensive to compile and publish. It requires the services of a skilled medical professional whose salary must then be added to printing expenses. 3) The pages devoted to abstracts take valuable space that could be used for articles and reviews of original research.

For these reasons most editorial board members favored discontinuing the section. However, because our readers had objected so vociferously to dropping the abstracts 5 years ago, we decided to survey the entire readership.

In the February issue, we included a postage-paid card asking readers whether the abstracts section should be continued or dropped. Less than 3% responded, so we included a second postcard in the April issue. To be sure everyone would see it, it was printed on the first page.

From the February mailing, we received 205 responses—and from the 7,095 cards sent with the April issues, we received an additional 101 responses. Thus, we received only 306 responses from both mailings. On first review, it appeared that 6,789 readers, or 95.7%, did not feel strongly enough to respond. Of those who cared enough to respond, 84 (1.2%) voted to discontinue the abstracts section and 222 (3.1%) voted to continue.

From these results, it seemed difficult to justify the expense and journal space required to publish a small, selected number of abstracts because of the wishes of only 3.1% of the readership. However, when I read all of the comments from our readers and editorial board members, I saw that a number pointed out that many developing countries and small communities do not have abstract services and computer facilities readily available. For them, the Stroke Abstracts of Literature are extremely valuable, and their discontinuation would be irreplaceable. For this reason, the abstracts will be continued for the time being.

Because the selection of the “most important” abstracts is subjective, the abstracts editor needs to be an experienced physician with special expertise in cerebrovascular disease. Therefore, we are delighted that two outstanding clinical investigators have agreed to serve in this position.

José Biller, Professor and Director of the Stroke Program at Northwestern Memorial Hospital at Northwestern University Medical School, and his colleague, Jeffrey L. Saver, will be the Abstracts Editors. With their quality leadership, we are certain that the sample of articles abstracted in Stroke will continue to be the very best.

We will continue to monitor responses from our readers. In the future, if the abstracts section appears to be less valuable to our readers, we will reconsider again.

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http://stroke.ahajournals.org/content/23/9/1219.citation

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