

LEARNED SOCIETY PUBLISHING

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What are the differences between learned society and commercial publishing? How is a small learned society organised, and what is the most likely scenario for the future?

Learned society publishing has many similarities with commercial publishing, but also many differences. To most people, looking at us from outside, the similarities are probably more obvious than the differences. To begin to understand why there *are* differences, it might help to start by looking at our *raison d'être* - our remits.

The prime remit of any publicly-owned commercial company is to provide income for its shareholders. If its chosen vehicle for this is publishing, it will hopefully choose its balance of products and prices with, at least partly, a view to its long-term image amongst its clientele, rather than just looking at short-term profits. In the end, though, a profit must be made.

Our remit probably typifies that of many learned societies. We exist to promote the advance of endocrinology, and we currently do this by publishing journals and books, by organising conferences and training courses, and by making grants.

Another difference between commercial and learned society publishers is that, in order to explain the activities we carry out, it is first necessary to describe our structure. Some learned societies separate their publishing operation completely from their membership activities, but we have one manager handling all our affairs. This allows the two parts to work together, exchanging information and ideas. It also ensures that our business operations do not forget the learned society remit which they exist to fulfil.

We are untypical of many learned societies in that we have four different 'entities' operating under one (small!) roof. This can be very confusing to suppliers who need to invoice under various names, and also to sponsors who are baffled when several organisations approach them for money, and they find they are talking to the same staff member in all cases. However, it does give us several bites at each cherry. It can be confusing to us, trying to remember which committee and constitution we are working to at any particular time.

Society for Endocrinology

The first of these four bodies is the Society for Endocrinology. This is the actual learned society and is the body most people will have heard of and want to be associated with. It was formed in 1946, so it will celebrate its Golden Jubilee next year. It has four types of

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membership - Honorary, Senior (retired), Ordinary and Student. About 80% of our members live in the UK. The Society is run by a Committee of 12 elected members and it has a number of sub-committees, handling scientific programmes, public relations and so on.

Looking at the Society's activities, it becomes clear that not very many of them are conducted by the Society itself. It acts as a public voice for endocrinology in the UK, organises a scientific meeting and AGM, awards medals, runs training courses, publishes a quarterly newsletter, and provides a number of benefits of membership. These include eligibility for conference grants and research grants, reduced conference and course registration, discounted books and journals (our own and other publishers') and, certainly not least, a feeling of community with other endocrinologists.

The Journal of Endocrinology Ltd

This is a body few people have heard of, but it is where all the action happens (in endocrinology, that is). This is a company limited by guarantee and was founded in 1938. It has been a charity since 1961. It is run by a Council of Management, consisting of the same twelve people as the Society's Committee. Confused? You soon will be. I still am after four years. This Council has one sub-committee - the all-powerful Publications Sub-Committee. It is this company which owns our property and employs the staff (or is it the other way round?).

The current activities of this charitable company include publishing the *Journal of Endocrinology* (1939-), the *Journal of Molecular Endocrinology* (1988-) and *Endocrine-Related Cancer* (1994-). In 1994 we also began an agreement with Blackwell Science by which their journal *Clinical Endocrinology* became the official clinical journal of the Society for Endocrinology. A small books programme was started in 1993.

In addition to publishing, the Journal of Endocrinology Ltd administers all our conference grants, our Studentship grant and our three research Fellowships, as well as providing financial support to meetings in relevant subject areas. The company also provides subventions to the Society, if needed.

The British Endocrine Societies (BES)

This is a federation of sixteen groups including the Society for Endocrinology. It has a Liaison Committee including a representative of each group and the Society's Treasurer. Its administration is handled entirely by the Society's Bristol office. The main BES activity is an annual conference, which is the major annual endocrine meeting other than the US Endocrine Society meeting. The BES also represents British endocrinology internationally, particularly in Europe. Interestingly, a recent proposal for a European Society of Endocrinology was supported by Britain, but voted down by Germany, who were supported by France and the Netherlands.

The Pituitary Foundation

This is a new venture. It is a patient support group set up with a view to collaboration between patients and doctors, rather than the confrontation which often occurs. The Pituitary Foundation was set up under the auspices of Journal of Endocrinology Ltd, which enabled us to get under way quickly and to raise funds from existing Society sponsors. It will be made into a separate charity shortly, and then Journal of Endocrinology Ltd will provide administrative services.

Activities of The Pituitary Foundation include information leaflets, telephone and postal support, putting members in touch with each other, maintaining a central database of patients, and raising awareness amongst GPs and the public. We hope to start a newsletter this year, and also to form our first regional support groups.

Our publishing activities

The basic steps in our publishing process are the same as those of commercial publishers: refereeing, editing, page make-up, printing, distribution, marketing and so on. Also, we all need to ensure our income is greater than our expenditure. The differences are subtle, but they are there. For instance, in the refereeing process, we make great use of Society members. They feel a sense of loyalty. We are lucky in that, in our

field, learned society publishers are some of the main players. We see our refereeing process as one of the ways we promote our Society. Authors know they will receive prompt and detailed reports on their manuscripts.

In the production area, we will often spend money increasing journal size or improving layout even if we do not predict increased sales from this. We offset this by having extremely cost-effective production systems and, again, being small helps as we can implement new systems very quickly. We use all authors' disks. We are able to accept disks from any word processor package. We put all of these into WordPerfect. We have a series of programmes to carry out some automatic editing (putting *et al* into italic is an example) and headings, references etc are also put into style at this stage. This means that our expensive, graduate editors do not waste their time underlining journal titles so that a typesetter will put them in italic. They can concentrate on meaning, ambiguity, and scientific content, and are much less likely to miss major problems in these areas now that they do not have to worry about small details.

For our two major journals, the disks go from us to the typesetter all in the same format, all edited, and all coded. This means that the typesetter only needs one conversion program. Figures are scanned into separate files, which are then integrated automatically into the nearest available spot to the place where they were flagged on the disk. Some manual checking of format still takes place before proofs go out. With one journal and all books, we handle the DTP ourselves and produce camera ready copy. We can even scan in the artwork, although colour, and some fine half-tones, are still processed by the printer.

Our marketing efforts will also have some difference of emphasis from commercial publishers. Firstly, we have to market the Society itself, not just its products. We do a lot of our marketing through our members and through sister societies. We get members to recruit other colleagues and can use our newsletter to increase members' loyalty to our products.

It is true that we need to have an excess of income over expenditure, but even here we are not constrained in quite the same ways as

commercial companies. For instance, the use of any surplus; it is fed back into endocrinology and into the academic system, via grants, subsidised training courses, and so on. The quantity of the surplus may also be different, in that we do not necessarily have to maximise our surplus, nor does it necessarily have to increase each year. We just need to cover the expenditure needed for our planned projects. As an example, this year, despite a 10% increase in size of *Journal of Endocrinology*, and despite substantial postage and paper price rises, we have pinned our sterling price rise to 2%, and have kept our dollar price the same as 1994. We have covered this by streamlining production, as outlined above, and by providing some funding from other sources. We will increase page budgets mid-year, if necessary to prevent backlogs, and this is likely to happen to all three journals this year.

Of course, from my point of view, all this altruism can have occasional drawbacks, in that a project I may see as financially sound may be turned down because it is not felt to be correct for the Society's image.

Issues concerning us

As can be imagined, there are many issues exercising our minds at present. However, I will touch on only two of these here: proliferation of literature, and electronic publications.

Are publishers to blame for the proliferation of academic literature? This material is being generated by academics, and the current system means they need to get it all published. Their careers depend on it, and so does their department's rating. This will only change if the system changes. But all the interested parties - funding bodies, academics, institutional management, libraries - are within the same academic system. Confrontation will only make each party retrench into its currently-held position. Only collaboration between all parties, and publishers, will find workable solutions. Interestingly, the challenges of electronic publishing, which are perceived to threaten publishers and libraries, could be a vehicle for achieving this new spirit of co-operation.

I think we all agree the electronic future will be very different from traditional publishing

scenarios. I've lost track of the number of seminars I've attended on electronic publishing. Am I any wiser about what the future will look like? On the contrary, the more I learn, the more I am confused. Fortunately, so is everyone else. Let me give you three, extremely simplistic, scenarios:

1. *The 'very drastic' option*

Cancellations escalate dramatically. Holdings are replaced largely by article access, mostly via BLDSC with no revenue to publishers. Many publishers, especially perhaps the smaller and learned society publishers, go out of business. Most learned societies would not then survive. Their contribution to their subject in terms of grants, conferences, training, publications, and peer networking, will be lost. Someone else will have to provide these services. If conferences and training courses are provided commercially, they will certainly cost more. The academic institution will have to fill the gap left by learned society grants by redistributing its budget, and what's the betting the library will be one of the losers? Meanwhile, the scientists will be severely disadvantaged until a new system is established.

2. *The 'fairly drastic' option*

Change could be less dramatic, but still severe. Losses could be partially offset by internal streamlining and revenue from new sources. Commercial publishers might have to accept lower profit levels. Learned societies might have to reduce their charitable activities. Again, scientists will need someone to replace these.

3. *The 'optimistic' option*

There could be a difficult interim period when subscriptions are cancelled and new revenue streams do not compensate. The market might then burgeon, with the volume of articles purchased electronically compensating for lost subscriptions, although internal streamlining will certainly still be needed.

The first two options are certainly not impossible, but mature industries do not

generally collapse. Other industries have been through life-threatening paradigm shifts and survived, against early expectations. The telecoms industry is an example. To many people, deregulation seemed like a death-knell for BT. People said the UK was too small a country to support more than one telecommunications company. There was a difficult period. BT had to streamline and it had to improve its customer service (remember when 9 out of 10 phone boxes were out of order?). Then, suddenly, we all started using faxes and modems. The need for an extra digit in our phone numbers is proof of the industry's emergence from the valley of the shadow of death into the sunlight shed by the convergence of telecommunications with computing, amongst other developments.

This example should not make us breathe a sigh of relief and loosen our belts again. It is not by any means clear where our new markets will come from or how they will be funded. The telecommunications industry had the whole population as its potential market; I feel less than confident about selling *Journal of Endocrinology* articles to the general public. Perhaps purchase costs will be spread amongst libraries, departments and individuals. Of course, as long as the current academic system continues, a limited amount of money will continue to chase an ever-increasing amount of information. In the end, it may need a major overhaul of the system to produce a halt to the spiral.

Conclusion

Learned societies must be professional in their operations, including their publishing. They must also keep in mind that they only exist to further research and dissemination of information, and to support their academic communities. Most societies would welcome discussion with academics and librarians, with the aim of providing the right service (whether electronic or print) at the right price. We should also be raising our members' awareness of library funding problems and urging them to take more interest and get more involved. The Society for Endocrinology is doing this by a regular series of articles in our members' newsletter.