Having been passed the torch

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This is my maiden effort as the new Editor-in-Chief of the Canadian Respiratory Journal (CRJ), and, to be honest, I am somewhat anxious about having something to say in this column on a regular basis that anyone else wants to read. However, I was happy to accept the position of Editor-in-Chief, and I knew that editorial writing was part of the job, so it's too late to whine.

Obviously, I accepted the job because I think that the CRJ matters. Before its premier issue in 1994, when David Cotton, then the President of the Canadian Thoracic Society (CTS), was polling the membership and negotiating arrangements with Pulsus Group, I was of distinctly two minds about a new Canadian journal devoted to respiratory disease. While I knew that there was plenty of excellent respiratory work going on in Canada, I was not convinced that people would view such a journal as an acceptable place in which to publish. After all, warm, fuzzy nationalism is one thing, while the splendor of one's curriculum vitae is quite another, and if there were a perceived conflict between the two, the second would win every time. The fact that I am now writing editorials for the CRJ indicates that my skepticism did not last.

In my office, I have a complete set of the CRJ from 1994 to the present. I saved them because I enjoyed them; I found that I read a larger fraction of the papers in the CRJ than in any other journal that I receive. Part of this is that I know a greater number of the authors in the CRJ than in any other journal I receive, but part of it is also that I found many papers to be useful in my clinical practice. From my point of view, the CRJ has been a success.

The main reason for the success of CRJ is, of course, my predecessor and erstwhile squash partner, Dr Norman Jones. Norman was and is a major figure in the Canadian pulmonary community. He gave the CRJ instant credibility. He also exhibited formidable patience, energy and dedication as Editor-in-Chief. From the beginning, the CRJ was a peer-reviewed affair with high standards. It probably wasn’t easy to maintain those standards in the face of an uncertain reception in the rest of the pulmonary community and an equally uncertain supply of manuscripts. However, Norman did not compromise. He succeeded in having the CRJ listed in Index Medicus/MEDLINE, probably the most widely recognized litmus test for the quality of a medical publication. He has been the Editor-in-Chief of the CRJ from its inception in the spring of 1994 until this issue, and the Canadian pulmonary community and the CTS are greatly in his debt. During his stewardship, submissions to the CRJ increased, especially submissions from outside of Canada. As recent issues attest, the CRJ is no longer limited to Canadian content. I have big shoes to fill, and those of you who know Norman know that this is literally, as well as figuratively, true.

I have no plans to change the CRJ in any major way. I will try to do more or less what Norman has done. Though the office has moved to Winnipeg, Manitoba, I am confident that the processes of assembly and publication of the CRJ will be unaffected. Norman has passed on his lists of reviewers and the database that automates, to some extent, the ‘paperwork’ involved in editing the CRJ, and so far, I have been successful (well, mostly successful) in getting it to work. The operating style will change little. Norman was largely his own secretary, and I will be the same. Norman was an obsessive fellow when it came to deadlines, etc, and I will be equally obsessive.

The above is not to say that I imagine the Journal is perfect, it’s just that at the moment, I don’t have any specific ideas for its improvement. On the other hand, I have learned that I don’t necessarily have a monopoly on good ideas, and I would be delighted to entertain suggestions about how the
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CRJ could be strengthened. If you have such a suggestion, please feel free to send me a note.

However, at the end of the day, the quality of the CRJ is not dependent on editorial policy or, for that matter, editors themselves. The quality of the CRJ depends on the level of support that it commands in the Canadian pulmonary community. The first and most important indicator of support is the papers submitted to the CRJ. If the papers are of good quality, then it is very likely that the Journal will be of good quality. I believe that it is reasonable to expect that the current quality of CRJ submissions should be maintained and perhaps improved. The Canadian pulmonary community remains academically strong; there is a lot of exciting work being done here. Further, publication in the premier North American (blue) journal is, in my experience, becoming harder and harder, and is attended by technical issues such as limits on word counts that can be difficult to deal with. I don’t view the other alternatives as particularly attractive, and I hope that other authors agree with me. A second vital issue bearing on the quality of the CRJ is the quality of its reviews. If reviews are expert, prompt and sympathetic, the Journal will continue to do well. Why these particular adjectives? Some of them are self explanatory. Expert reviews ensure that good work is published and that bad work is not. Prompt reviews and prompt decisions make authors, editors and publishers happy, and a prompt review takes no more time than one that is delayed. Finally, by sympathetic reviews, I mean that the CRJ should work from a positive bias; we should approach the editorial process by looking for a reason to publish a given paper and not for a reason to reject one, which I believe is increasingly common in current medical journalism. This was Norman’s view, and he developed a remarkable network of prompt and expert reviewers, even though, as we all know, reviewing papers is a (nearly) thankless task.

Thus far, the CRJ has been a success. I devoutly hope that it will continue to be a success under my editorship, and I will do everything that I can to ensure this outcome. However, it is really you, the readers and authors, who ultimately make the difference. If authors submit good work, and respond to requests with expert promptness and sympathetic reviews, the CRJ will truly prosper. Please do so!