Editorial

The British Journal of Industrial Medicine: 50 years on

The decision to publish a journal of industrial medicine in 1944, with a war still being fought and with serious shortages of virtually everything required for such an enterprise was certainly courageous (as one former editor has described it); it was also part of the mood of the country which seemed determined actually to ensure that social wrongs that had existed before the war would be righted. The most important mark of this was the fact that it was during the war years, when it was by no means certain that the Allies would be victorious, that the Beveridge Report on social and allied services and the white paper on the National Health Service were published (in 1942 and 1944 respectively).

Conditions of work during the war were arduous, long hours were worked by a large and often inexperienced workforce in factories that were often poorly lit, badly heated, and badly maintained. The exigencies of war meant that some substances banned in peacetime had to be used; benzene was introduced into the munitions industry, for example. Nevertheless, the general standard of industrial health was kept at a surprisingly high level, due in no small part to the effects of the Medical Inspectors of Factories, whose work at the height of the conflict was described by Merewether; and by industrial medical officers. In his review of the war years, Chesteney, the Chief Inspector of Factories, particularly picked out the comprehensive industrial health service set up by the Ministry of Supply at the Royal Ordnance Factories for praise.

In the war years industrial health was seen to have an importance that it has probably not enjoyed since and there was some expectation, or at least encouragement, of the development of a national industrial health service. The Royal College of Physicians published a report in 1945 that advocated such a step and this was warmly welcomed by Lord Moran who, in his foreword to the first issue, had also envisaged that "the structure of industrial medicine will be the general structure of the medical services of the country, working along parallel lines."

The impetus to produce the journal was provided by the Association of Industrial Medical Officers (AIMO) at the end of 1942. The matter was raised with the British Medical Association (BMA) who were already publishing three other quarterly specialist medical journals, the Journal of Neurology and Psychiatry, Archives of Disease in Childhood and the British Heart Journal. Initially there was some disagreement as to the style of the proposed journal. The view of the AIMO was that it should be their official publication although Hugh Clegg, who was then Deputy Editor of the British Medical Journal and representing the BMA because Horner the Editor was ill, strongly urged that it should be similar in style and content to the other three specialist journals published by the BMA. In the end his view prevailed and it was with this intent that the first meeting of the editorial board took place in December 1942 and the first issue appeared in January 1944.

The Editors
Donald Hunter was the first editor, helped in the initial stages by Donald Stewart and Donald Norris. A small allocation of paper was made for the first issue, which rapidly went out of print. A reprint was made with a new allocation of paper but supply was still not able to keep up with demand. There was no immediate shortage of copy, however, for despite Clegg's intentions, the first two volumes contained general articles on a number of diverse topics which kept the journal going although Hunter and his colleagues, most notably Kenneth Perry, began to contribute an increasing number of papers arising out of their work at the MRC Department for Research in Industrial Medicine that had been established at the London Hospital in 1943. They wrote many important papers—for example, on inorganic mercury poisoning, bagassosis, platinum asthma, Raynaud's phenomenon, TOCP polyneuropathy, and fluorosis—that undoubtedly helped to raise the standard and the standing of the journal.

There is no doubt that the BJIM is one of Hunter's most significant contributions to occupational medicine but the progress of the journal was by no means one of unimpeded success. On more than one occasion the editorial committee expressed dissatisfaction with the standard of
material that made up the proceedings of the AIMO and in 1949 a decision was taken to select the material from this quarter more carefully. At the same time, and compounding the problem, was the shortage of material from other sources, and in June 1949, Hunter had to inform the committee that he had in hand only seven papers for future issues, and the April issue of 1950 was a scant 29 pages. Hunter had been ill and after a period of convalescence went to Australia on a lecture tour; at an editorial committee meeting in 1950 in his absence Clegg told the other members that he had found only a single paper in the cupboard and had therefore taken upon himself to write to all the members of the committee to ask them to help by sending him papers.

The journal survived this crisis but Hunter resigned the editorship which passed to Richard Schilling in 1951. Schilling had been asked by Hunter to act for him during his illness and there was no dissent to his appointment as Hunter's successor. It was under Schilling's editorship that the journal was firmly established as a publication of international scientific merit. While the credit for this cannot be taken away from him, Schilling had and took the advantage of two fortunate circumstances. In 1951 it was decided that the AIMO would publish its own Transactions, thus removing the necessity to publish material in the journal that was not necessarily to the standard required, and the second was the establishment of university departments of industrial medicine, which helped to raise the quality of the practice of occupational medicine both through research and through training.

There was some dismay at the decision of the AIMO to publish its own Transactions as it was feared that the new publication might be a rival to the journal although this was never intended and both Schilling and Leslie Norman (the president of the AIMO) were members of the editorial committees of both publications.

Schilling made only a few changes in the policy of the journal although he did introduce a section called “miscellany” in 1953 that was intended to contain a variety of contributions shorter than those in the main section for original papers; in one way or another this has continued to the present albeit under various headings. There was also discussion about the desirability of publishing correspondence (in 1951) and editorials (in 1953) but the committee rejected both, the second having been especially disapproved of by Bradford Hill. In 1954, when Schilling was considering resigning as editor, two assistant editors, Norman and John Gilson were appointed and Schilling continued in position in 1956 when Leslie Norman took over.

Norman was editor from 1956 to 1962 and he has been the only other editor (apart from Hunter) not to have held an academic position. Having begun his career with the General Post Office in 1935, Norman became chief medical officer of London Transport after war service and he served in this capacity from 1946 to 1969 when he died at the early age of 60. During his period as editor, there were relatively few changes, although he introduced the practice of printing abstracts at the start of papers rather than summaries at the end to bring the journal more into line with other medical journals.

Norman’s successor as editor in 1963 was Ronald Lane who had begun his lifelong interest in lead poisoning on his appointment as medical officer for Chloride Electrical Storage Batteries in the late 1920s. He was appointed to the newly founded chair of industrial medicine at Manchester University in 1945 and was reaching the age at which most people would be looking forward to retirement when he agreed to take on the editorship as an interregnum until another candidate could be found.

At this period, in the early 1960s, the journal was well established with a subscription list of more than 1700 but the number of papers received was not much more than 50 a year, this number having remained static for about five years. Moreover, there was increasing competition from new journals in the field both in the United Kingdom and abroad. The shortage of papers became more acute in 1964 when only 14 papers were in hand. This dearth of material was blamed on the fact that there were more journals in the field and it was suggested that the alternative solutions were to lower the standards for acceptance or publish fewer pages. Neither was considered feasible but there was some support for the publication of review articles at the rate of one a month. At the same time there was a quest to find Lane’s replacement. It was originally intended that this should be Gilson but although he had declared himself willing to take up the position in 1963, in the next year, when the time came he found himself too heavily committed, stating, however, that he might reconsider in two or three years time. In 1965 Gilson finally declined the position and Tim (W R) Lee was elected Lane’s successor.

Lee was in Lane’s department in Manchester and succeeded him both as editor of the journal and professor of occupational medicine at the University; he presided over the affairs of the journal for the next six years. During his time, the journal had one of its periodic face lifts and he introduced a new section entitled “current awareness”. It was proposed that the titles of papers trawled from a computer search and of interest to occupational health practitioners should be published in the journal and this was started in 1969.
with the help of a grant from the Office of Scientific and Technical Information of the Department of Education and Science. It ran for a year and reappeared as the "information section" in 1972. When Lee vacated the editor's chair in 1972 the journal was in the satisfactory position of having more than 2200 subscribers, of having seen an increase in the number of papers submitted, and of having increased the number of pages.

The days of plenty seemed to have arrived but when Lee was succeeded by Ian McCallum, who held the chair in industrial health at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, he had soon to report to the editorial committee yet another decline in the number of papers. McCallum suggested broadening the scope of the journal to include environmental issues and consideration was given to changing the name of the journal to indicate this possible change of emphasis. Broadening the scope and changing the name continued to be discussed during McCallum's editorship but the journal was passed on unchanged in either to the present incumbent in 1980, then working at the TUC Centenary Institute of Occupational Health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

When Waldron took over the journal it was being widely distributed throughout the world and subscriptions had been increasing year by year with one exception and it had had another facelift so that it conformed with the house style of all the BMA's specialist journals. The journal had actually decreased in size during McCallum's editorship, however, and the length of time from acceptance to publications was considerable. This was the first task tackled by Waldron. The Information Section was reduced in size and then discontinued and in 1985 the journal began to be published monthly rather than quarterly. Editorials were published and a correspondence column was introduced.

The scope of the journal
At the end of 50 years of publication the BJIM has established itself as a major scientific journal. It has the highest citation index of any British publication in the fields of public or occupational health and the highest rating of any occupational health journal. The Editor now receives between two and three hundred papers a year from all over the world, most from outside the United Kingdom.

The content of the journal has tended to reflect both the practice of occupational health and the personal inclination of the editors. The first issues contain much clinical material and papers dealing with frank clinical disease; as the years have gone on, the emphasis has increasingly been on epidemiology and the investigation of the effects of ever decreasing levels of exposure to toxic substances.

The nature of occupational health has changed greatly since 1944 and this is amply demonstrated by scanning the contents pages of the journal, something this author did when preparing this brief review.

Many of the expectations raised in the early numbers of the journal have not materialised; there is no national occupational health service nor likely to be one so that most of the work force has no access to occupational health; the research base has diminished rather than increased; training in medical schools (and some would say at a post-graduate level) is poor and it is not clear to some what occupational health practitioners will be doing in another 10 years time. One prospect is for them to become fully involved in environmental health and it is certain that the journal will move more in this direction in the future; almost from its inception the scope of the journal has been discussed and environmental health has frequently been a matter of debate for the editorial committee. There have also been many proposals to change the name. One editor remarked that it was not British, not a journal, and not industrial; otherwise the title was an accurate indication of what went on between the covers.

These debates will doubtless continue. The present editor is known to favour a greater incursion into environmental health and, if forced, would admit to a wish for a new title. Whatever happens, however, the publishers of the BJIM may be congratulated on their brave decision to publish a new journal in a relatively new field and may be proud of the achievements of the editors and their colleagues in guiding it through its first successful 50 years.

Past editors of the British Journal of Industrial Medicine

D Hunter 1944-50
RSF Schilling 1951-56
LG Norman 1957-62
RE Lane 1962-65
WR Lee 1966-72
RI McCallum 1972-79
HA Waldron present editor