

## Letter to the Editor

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*Acta chir belg*, 2003, **103**, 535

### Do we need a Belgian Surgical Journal ?

Sir,

Do we need a Belgian surgical scientific journal ? The recent evolution of the *Acta* on the one hand and the changing landscape in European surgical publishing on the other hand urges us to repose this question. Indeed, the surgical community of the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and Swiss have given up the concept of a national surgical journal in order to merge with the *British Journal of Surgery* (BJS), conferring thereby several advantages to these surgeons. I strongly feel that it would be in the interest of the Belgian surgical community to merge its scientific efforts with the BJS and abandon the *Acta* as a national forum.

With a 2002 impact factor of 0,269 and many papers originating from Asian countries, the *Acta* does not achieve a prominent scientific role nor does it reflect Belgian surgical practice. By merging the *Acta* with the

BJS, the Belgian surgical community would be offered a high impact forum for quality papers while diminishing the ever growing plethora of case reports and small retrospective series. The 'social' function of the *Acta* could easily be taken over by a (online, via *belsurg*) newsletter issued by the Royal Society.

This idea may come as a cold shower for those who have invested considerable time and effort in publishing the *Acta*. However, merging with the BJS would in my opinion be in the best interest of the Belgian surgeons and with the successful reform and new look of the Society, this issue should be open to discussion. I invite the Editors and those responsible in the board of the RBSS to give it a thought.

W. P. Ceelen  
*University Hospital Ghent, Belgium.*

### Answer of the Editors

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*Acta chir belg*, 2003, **103**, 535-537

### Acta Chirurgica Belgica : a Challenging Task Worth the Efforts ?

#### *Do we need a Belgian surgical scientific journal ?*

This is the question raised by WP Ceelen in a letter to the editors of the *Acta Chirurgica Belgica*. First of all, we would like to thank our colleague for acknowledging that some people are still investing considerable time and effort in publishing bimonthly the *Acta*. The problem being for our fellow surgeon that this is a worthless and ineffective task somewhat pertaining to the fruitless toil of Sisyphus. In other words, to prepare six issues of the *Acta* every year is akin to pushing uphill a big stone which anyway will roll down as soon as it reaches the top. Sometimes, our feeling about the job of editor is rather close to such a metaphoric analysis of our endless efforts. We would even add that there are many more interesting and valuable things for us to be done than to get in print a journal whose cumulative impact factor over the past thirty years is much below our personal cumulative impact factor over the last ten years.

But let's stop being facetious and recall that, as stated in the editorial of April 1996 (vol 96 : 49– 50), the redaction of the *Acta Chirurgica Belgica* is a big challenge. Did the editors succeed in their effort to improve and maintain the national surgical journal *Acta Chirurgica Belgica* ? Well, W.P.Ceelen should read this editorial and evaluate the contents of the most recent volumes of the *Acta Chirurgica Belgica*.

Nevertheless, W. P. Ceelen's letter has the merit to open, once more, the debate about the foundation and justification of the *Acta Chirurgica Belgica*, one of the basements of the Royal Belgian Society for Surgery. Previous criticisms having been formulated ten years ago (1994 : "*Notre société, la Grande Dame, est-elle encore en état de galloper ?*") about the sense and meaning of the R.B.S.S. The recent reforms, conducted by the general secretary and the bureau, proved in fact that there is a place for the R.B.S.S. within the wide landscape of surgical sub-specialities. And the coordinating

role of the R.B.S.S. is focused on its bimonthly journal, the *Acta Chirurgica Belgica*, and on its yearly congress, the Belgian Surgical Week.

Anyway, as we are between surgeons, let's put it bluntly and frankly. Is it a good solution for Belgian surgery as a whole – general and related specialties surgeons, old and young – to line up with the surgical communities of Scandinavian, Dutch and Swiss countries in order to merge into the *British Journal of Surgery* ?

We think – but this matter has to be discussed by the executives of the Belgian Royal Society of Surgery and be decided by a general assembly – that merging with the BJS because others are doing so is a panurgic way to solve our *problems*. Or even more, by doing so we refuse to face rationally and reasonably our problems by acting just like sheeps which are just lining up in order to die by falling off the cliff as in the novel of Rabelais about the giants “Pantagruel and Gargantua”. Of course, the giant who has to swallow the consenting *Acta Chirurgica* being here the BJS.

#### ***But which are the problems ?***

It is more and more difficult for many obvious and hidden reasons to get a surgeon sit down and write down a paper. It is even more so with the new generation of surgeons whose “instant gratification” philosophy is a fact regardless of any judgement of values.

At the other end of the scale, many respectable Belgian surgeons have been and still are invited to submit a survey or a state of the art in a particular field of their speciality...but they often omit to accept the invitation. This is regrettable, however, it is not a reason for the editors to abandon their task !

Even more precisely, it is also very difficult to get a regular and rapid collaboration from our fellow senior surgeons for the peer-reviewing process of a journal which – despite the fact its impact factor is low – at least has an impact factor and is referenced in the citation index. Senior surgeons should think about dedicating some more time for teaching, coaching and supervising the younger surgeons or trainees through the demands and the pitfalls of paper writing and submitting process. Furthermore, we, as surgeons of a little big country at least in the surgical world, have to fulfil two basic demands. On one hand, a senior surgeon must have from time to time something interesting to share with his surgical community ; on the other hand, for a young surgeon or a trainee to start publishing within the *Acta* could be a good bet and be some kind of encouragement before climbing the ladder of the blue ribbon journals. In the past, many of us have followed this way ; now, some of us should not bite the hand that fed them. For this very simple reason of equity, some of us are still trying ingenuously to pave this way for the younger

generation. But to put all of this in other words : contribution to a scientific surgical journal is like a surgical operation, some do it beautifully, stubbornly and sometimes seemingly effortlessly, others just don't give a damn.

The author of the letter to the editor is right when he states that most settled Belgian surgeons do not judge it worthwhile to publish in the *Acta Chirurgica Belgica*. The only thing we can be sure of is that the vast majority of those who have not dedicated, once in a while, some effort, some time or some consideration to their national surgical journal are most likely the very same who have never or will ever get something in print in the BJS.

More practically, the *Acta Chirurgica Belgica* offers an educational opportunity to the young fellows in surgery and the trainees to submit a scientific paper, in collaboration with their chief of surgical service or department. Furthermore, since many years, efforts are made also to include “Invited Papers” written by authorities from all over the world in a specific field of surgery. Their messages are worthwhile and not futile. Well-written case-reports can be instructive too. The recent issues of the *Acta Chirurgica Belgica* on euthanasia, on medical responsibility, on patient's rights and informed consent, underscore the role of the *Acta Chirurgica Belgica* in opening debate on controversial topics of modern life. Editorials such as “Ethical and Philosophical Foundations of Informed Consent” (2003 ; vol 103 : 1 – 4) as well as extensive review about the “Protection of the patient's private life facing the computer challenge” (2002 ; vol 102 : 282-288 and 404-410), can have an impact on daily surgical practice. A national survey, as the one on bile duct injury associated with cholecystectomy (vol 103 : 168 – 180) invite to some reflections on new techniques and on yet to be evaluated surgical innovations. This is particularly important at the time of the new era of Evidence Based Medicine we are living in.

To go back to the Greek mythology, let us mention that sisyphian ordeal and conduct is also part of a surgeon's life. Therefore, we want to make a final comment on the following statement made by our colleague WP Ceelen : “...with a majority of papers originating from countries like Turkey and Eastern Europe, the *Acta* certainly does not enjoy a widespread scientific reputation and it is my guess that most Belgian surgeons do not go further than the editorials or calendar...”. All right for the huge backlog of papers coming from Turkey. However, sometimes the qualities of the content, of the English phrasing and the adherence to the instructions for authors are much better than some of their Belgian counterparts.

But it is about *Eastern Europe* that our colleague's statement is particularly short-minded. Let us remind him an editorial of the April 2002 issue of the *Journal* he

might have had a glance at... In fact over the past five years, the *Acta Chirurgica Belgica* have published some good papers coming from some landmark and historical places of the art of Surgery and of basic Sciences in former Eastern Europe, where great names of surgery worked and that each surgeon knows or at least should know. Let us just mention the places and the names of some of those prestigious surgeons and scientists : the old Jagellonian University of Krakow (1364) the city of Rydygier and Mikulicz, but above all the city of Copernicus. The Karlova University of Prague (1348) with Purkinje and Kepler. *La Charité Hospital* (former East-Berlin), the place where Sauerbruch, Volkman and Langenbeck practised and taught surgery ; and where Theodor Billroth served as a trainee in surgery. But also papers from Riga in Latvia, one of the first Hanseatic city of the Baltic Sea and papers from Kiev in Ukraine, the town of Alexander Shalimov, who is actually the inventor of the modern surgical stapling devices. Last but not least : Budapest, where Ignác Semmelweis working on the puerperal fever did develop the concept of nosocomial infections. At the same period of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, Louis Pasteur in France was initiating what would become modern immunology and Joseph Lister in England was creating the basis of the antiseptic method. So progresses came from cross fertilisation from all parts of Europe. Cross fertilisation which is a usual tool for pragmatic surgeons who, understanding that history is an ongoing process, are standing at the forefront of changes and progresses. Well, some Belgian surgeons did not want to miss new historical challenges at the level of our continent. Instead of adopting a conceited attitude towards those former Eastern European colleagues, we welcomed their papers in the *Acta* according to the criteria of the journal and we helped them. Needless to say that it was easier for them to get published in the *Acta* than in the *BJS*. But at least they got their feet in the door of the citation index. Needless to add

also that we can learn a lot from surgeons from those countries. Is our estimate colleague – who self-appointed himself as the liquidator aimed at conducting the winding up of the *Acta Chirurgica* – ready to do the same efforts for young Belgian surgeons, but above all for colleagues from all over the reunified European Continent, including from countries which happened to fall on the bad side of the Yalta Conference in 1945 ? If his answer is yes, then we can assure him that there is plenty of work to be done in the *Acta* before joining the *BJS*.

For all these reasons, we think there is still some space left in Europe for a Belgian Surgical Journal next to the *BJS* providing some Belgian surgeons are ready to continue a task pertaining perhaps to the fruitless toil of Sisyphus but, nevertheless, belonging also to the thriving momentum of Europe which is trying to balance ways and means, resources and knowledge between the different parts of the continent.

The *Acta Chirurgica* are far from their ideal image, as evoked in the editorial of April 1996. But, is a merger with the *BJS* not a resignation or a desertion in front of a challenging task, leaving it to a supra-national organisation ? Well, we started this letter with the metaphor of the fruitless toil of Sisyphus, we will conclude it with a simple analogy. Ultimately, if little Belgium had no national tennis league, would it ever produce two number one in a row the very same year ? The tennis ball is rolling for us on the tennis court, why the hell the heavy stone of the *Acta*, that has been pushed for 103 years by some dedicated Belgian surgeons, would have to roll down toward the realm of nothingness !

Luc Michel  
Marie-Louise Druart †  
Hendrik Van Damme

*Editors of the Acta Chirurgica Belgica.*