

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

# Rapid response: future alternative to letter to the Editor?

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## Dear Editor

Scientific publication has undergone transformation in this technology driven modern world. Majority of journals are now available in the electronic form on the World Wide Web (internet). In future it is likely that some journals will cease to be printed and would only be available in digital form. With these changes, most online medical and scientific journals now have rapid response section(s) in the form of comments, discussion forum or blogs. Comments can be posted by anyone registered on the site. The registration is free and simple.

The Rural and Remote Health (RRH), a completely online open access journal, allows for comments as well as discussion for all the papers (including articles published in the past and 'Letter to the Editor'). This leads to rapid and wide dissemination of information and ideas. The readers of

RRH even in remote areas can access an article the moment it goes online and write their comments. This helps in generating quick and useful feedback from the people in the field and far flung areas. They don't have to wait for the journal to reach them by post which takes weeks to months. This is one of the major advantages of open access movement. Online discussion facilitates interaction, exchange of ideas and healthy debate and provides opportunity for readers to react. Being paperless, there is no dearth of space. It is eco-friendly and economical. Many people can post responses and even multiple responses can be posted. Such forums help in doing away with the time constraints and word limits of the 'letter to the editor' column and allow views to be posted at any time online.

Nevertheless there are a few shortcomings of this online system. The access to the internet, ownership of computers and electricity is limited and more so in the developing countries and rural and remote areas of Asia and Africa.



Besides, older and middle aged people still find traditional letter writing more comfortable. But these are minor issues and access to internet is growing everywhere as people are increasingly becoming tech savvy and computer friendly. Technology is reaching even the remote areas and becoming more affordable. If the popularity and the number of views an article generates is any indication, RRH should be considered extremely successful. Thus the benefits outweigh the drawbacks.

However, there are a few queries and concerns. Can a rapid response be cited as a publication like its predecessor, the conventional letter? Will it be indexed in a search engine or scientific citation index? Would it carry weight if it is not peer reviewed (the comments on RRH are monitored by a moderator for language and abuse) as in the case of some journals? May be there would be an index for these responses and blogs too in the days to come.

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Will these online rapid responses, blogs and forums obliterate the erstwhile letter writing and the hitherto important column? Will the traditional 'Letter' be relegated into oblivion by modern technology? Only time will tell.

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