

Books reviewed

edited by Michele Benjamin

Units, symbols, and abbreviations: a guide for biological and medical editors and authors, (fourth edition); edited by D. N. Baron. London: Royal Society of Medicine Services. 1988. 64 p. Paperback. ISBN 0-905958-78-0. £5.00.

This 64-page booklet is the fourth edition of a publication which first appeared in 1971. It is divided into four parts: first, a section on units, their names and definitions; second, a section on symbols and abbreviations for these units; third, a section presenting some of the methods for listing bibliographic references; fourth, a list of the standard proof correction marks taken from BS 5261. The selection of material is such that each section contains just that information which is thought to be needed by every editor and copy editor of a biomedical book, or journal.

One aim of this booklet is to encourage the use of the International System (SI) of Units and their associated standard abbreviations. Despite pleas from some doctors,¹ there is a movement towards the use of SI units in clinical journals in North America,² and the editor of this booklet is an advocate for change to the SI system in this country.³ Those who are familiar with biochemical publishing will already be accustomed to the SI system of units and will wonder why its adoption in clinical medicine has been so tardy. The Department of Health and Social Security gave a target date of 1 Dec. 1975 for its adoption in the National Health Service.⁴ During this period of change and uncertainty, any useful aid for authors and editors is to be welcomed. The fact that there is a continuing demand for new editions of this booklet is perhaps an indication of its value.

Of course, it is possible for editors to use original documents (publications of the British Standards Institute, the Royal Society Report 'Quantities, Units, and Symbols', etc.) for information and guidance, but the advantage of this publication is that selection from these original sources has already been carefully done by the editor and the material has been presented logically and clearly within the compass of a manageable reference booklet. Authors and editors may still need to refer occasionally to original sources, for example, the ICMJE Uniform Requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals,⁵ but the RSM booklet could quickly become the primary source of reference on units and symbols.

The message of promoting uniformity in biomedical publishing runs through all four sections with the proof correction marks being derived from BS 5261. Adoption of this internationally recognized system would replace the familiar marginal notes, for example those used by the university presses, with symbols. However, its use will depend on the familiarity of the typesetters with the

system and, as with SI units, older, familiar practice will undoubtedly persist alongside the new.

The debate about the use of SI units in clinical medicine will no doubt continue, but authors and editors need to be consistent in presenting data to their readers and this booklet achieves its aim in providing a useful source of reference and guidance to its target readership of authors and editors, especially copy editors, of biomedical publications. Having been a member of the Royal Society of Medicine for 24 years, I was somewhat surprised at not previously knowing of the existence of this valuable guide. I am glad to be introduced to it and I am sure that it will become as familiar to me as my other aids to editing.

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References

1. Prescott, L. F., Proudfoot, A. T., Widdop, B. *et al.* Who needs molar units for drugs? *Lancet* 1987; 1:1127-8
2. Editorial: Now read this: the SI units are here. *J. Am Med Assoc* 1986; 255: 2329-39
3. Baron, D. N. Use of molar units for drugs and toxins? *Br Med J* 1986; 293: 2-3
4. Anon. DHSS wants introduction of SI units in NHS by December 1. *Pharmaceut J* 1975; 203: 451
5. International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals. *Br Med J* 1988; 296: 401-5.

Bringing typesetting in-house: the options for publishers, by Kathy Munro.
London: Blueprint, 132 + xii pp. ISBN 0 948905 16 6. £25.

In-house typesetting has rarely been an attractive option for publishers in the recent past, though several, both learned society and commercial, have tackled it. One reason has been the high capital cost of typesetting equipment, and the associated requirement to obtain high throughput for an acceptable return on investment. In strategic terms, publishers have seen this route as reducing flexibility of supply and constraining future options, in contrast to their traditional role as fast-moving middle-man. Additionally, they may have baulked at the prospect of managing print sector industrial relations.

Kathy Munro sets out 'to appraise what recent technical developments mean in real working applications for book and magazine publishers, supplemented with a directory of systems to aid both their awareness, and their choice.' She practises what she preaches, by the way: the book was originated on a PC compatible in WordStar using ASPIC coding, converted to Telos and output on a Linotron 202. And very nice output it is too, though 12/14 is for my taste an unnecessarily large body text for the normally sighted. It does help fill the pages though.