Changes ahead for IJSEM in 2006

In 1998, publication of the International Journal of Systematic Bacteriology (IJSB) passed from the American Society for Microbiology (ASM) to the Society for General Microbiology (SGM). In that year, 181 papers were published in the journal, and some 60% of those papers concerned the description of new taxa, the emendation of descriptions or the proposal of taxonomic rearrangements. The Editorial Board of the journal consisted of six members.

Much has changed since SGM took over publication of IJSB. The name was changed in 2000 to the International Journal of Systematic and Evolutionary Microbiology (IJSEM), and the publication frequency was increased from four to six issues a year. The requirements of the Bacteriological Code changed, first to require deposit of new proposed type strains in two recognized collections in different countries and then to require documentation from those collections confirming the viability and availability of such strains. In January 2001, the journal became available online with HighWire Press with full text in PDF format, and HTML full text was added in January 2003. Online submission to the journal was introduced in 2001 and became compulsory in the middle of 2003. The journal introduced the Papers in Press scheme in December 2001. Since that time, over 750 accepted author manuscripts have been published ahead of print in this way. Erko Stackebrandt retired as Editor of the journal in 2002, to be succeeded briefly by Hans Trüper and then by Peter Kämpfer. The appearance of the journal was completely redesigned by SGM staff with the January 2003 issue, and this new design received a ‘Highly Commended’ award at the 2003 ALPSP/Charlesworth Learned Journals Awards.

**Staff changes**

Aidan Parte, who had served as Managing Editor of IJSB and then IJSEM since the takeover from ASM, left SGM in December 2003 and was succeeded first by Robin Dunford as Managing Editor and then in July 2004 by Lesley Hoyles as Senior Staff Editor following the reorganization of the journal management structure at SGM. Lesley left SGM in March 2005 to return to research, and Melanie Scourfield took over her role as Senior Staff Editor. Natalie Wilder, previously a Staff Editor on IJSEM, was appointed Senior Staff Editor of Journal of General Virology in July 2004, and IJSEM now boasts two Staff Editors, Pauline Stevenson, who joined us in January 2005, and Karen Rowlett, who arrived in April 2005. Sarah Ferris has continued her excellent work as Editorial Assistant for the journal since taking over from Hazel Hatton in 2001.

**Changes to the Editorial Board**

By mid 2003, when the last Editorial appeared in IJSEM [Int J Syst Evol Microbiol 53 (2003), 625–626], the Editorial Board had grown to 13 members. The last 2 years have seen further changes. Mark Farmer, who took over responsibility for papers covering the protists after Miklos Müller’s retirement, resigned from the board because of work commitments and was replaced by James Berger in December 2003. Lindsay Sly resigned from the board in May 2004 and her place was taken by Jean-François Bernardet in October 2004. Dave Pitcher has unfortunately also had to retire from the board because of ill health, and his replacement is Richard Birtles, who joined the board in May 2005. Finally, Lyudmila Evtushenko and Christian Hertel have joined the board as ‘supernumerary’ members, in May 2003 and April 2005, respectively, bringing the total complement of the Editorial Board to 15.

Following the meeting of the IJSEM Editorial Board during the recent International Union of Microbiological Societies (IUMS) Congress in San Francisco, it was decided to introduce a number of changes to the contents categories used in the journal with effect from the January 2006 issue. The category ‘New Taxa – Gram-positive Bacteria’ will be split into ‘New Taxa – Actinobacteria’ and ‘New Taxa – Other Gram-positive Bacteria’, the category ‘New Taxa – Other Bacteria’ will be split and a new category of ‘New Taxa – Bacteroidetes’ introduced, and the category ‘New Taxa – Unicellular Eukaryotes’ will be renamed ‘New Taxa – Eukaryotic Micro-organisms’ to reflect the fact that some multicellular eukaryotic microbes fall within the scope of IJSEM.

**Journal publication frequency**

Against this backdrop of change, one constant has remained: the continuing increase in the number of papers submitted to the journal. The nature of IJSEM means that its rejection rate remains low in comparison with less specialized journals, so increased submissions inevitably mean more papers published. In 2005, 436 papers have been published in IJSEM, an increase of over 240% over the 7 years since SGM took over publication of the journal. This increase is an indication of the health of research into systematic microbiology and reflects the accelerating pace of description of new taxa, aided by increased accessibility and sophistication of the molecular techniques central to the identification of micro-organisms, as well as improvements in sampling and cultivation techniques. Continued increases in submission have impacted on the journal; around 85% of papers published in 2005 concern the description of new taxa or other taxonomic opinions, reflecting the unavoidable tightening of the scope of the journal. A conscious effort by the Editorial Office and Editorial Board has meant that over 80% of papers are now published in the ‘note’ format, bringing the average length of printed papers down from 8–8 pages in 1999 to 5–9 pages this year. However, several recent issues of the journal have still contained over 500 pages; not only are such issues awkward to produce and expensive to mail, but they may also be unwelcome for librarians and readers. The rise in submissions to the journal shows no sign of slowing; 20% more papers
have been submitted to the journal in 2005
than in 2004. The decision has therefore
been taken to move to monthly publication
of IJSEM, starting with the January 2006
issue.

Monthly publication will allow us to
publish smaller issues of the journal, and it
will also reduce times to publication, as
papers that just miss inclusion in one issue
wait only one month, not two, for the next.
Notification Lists will continue to be
published in each issue, whereas Validation
Lists will appear in every other issue,
himonthly as at present.

One consequence of the move to monthly
publication has been the decision that, as of
1 January 2006, PDFs of author manuscripts
will no longer be included in the Papers in
Press scheme, although the list of accepted
papers will continue to be provided. The
original reason behind the launch of the
scheme, the length of time to publication, is
no longer a significant issue. Through
increasing the number of staff at the Editorial
Office and making greater use of freelance
copy-editors, the time from acceptance to
publication in IJSEM has decreased by up to
5 months over the last 2 years, and the move
to monthly publication will take a further
month off this wait.

Processing, editing and reviewing more
submissions, publishing more papers and
publishing those papers more quickly, as
well as investing in rapidly developing
publishing technology, all come at a cost,
which is covered in part by the above-
inflation increase in the subscription price
for 2006. Yet authors wishing to publish
in IJSEM still do so without any author
charges. The SGM, together with the
Editorial Board of IJSEM, the International
Committee on Systematics of Prokaryotes
(ICSP) and the IUMS and its Bacteriology
and Applied Microbiology Division, would
like to maintain this absence of author
charges, as long as subscription income is
sufficient to cover the cost of producing the
journal to its current high standard and the
journal remains in good financial health.

The IJSEM Submission
Declaration

Another change that will be introduced
from 1 January 2006 is a submission
declaration as part of the process of
submitting a paper to IJSEM. Part of this
declaration will be familiar from the
submission procedures of many other
journals, being an acknowledgement that all
of the authors agree to the submission
and that the corresponding author may
act on their behalf in subsequent processing
of the paper.

The second part of this declaration concerns
the deposit of proposed type strains in
culture collections. A number of culture
collection curators have expressed concern
that authors sometimes fail to take account
of the amount of effort and time required
to accession a new strain into a culture
collection. Culture collections may come
under pressure to provide accession
numbers unrealistically quickly because
authors need confirmation of deposit in
order for their papers to be accepted for
publication in IJSEM. This second section
of the submission declaration simply
outlines that responsibility for timely strain
deposit rests entirely with the author.
Neither the culture collection, the editor
handling the paper nor the journal itself
accepts any responsibilities that arise from a
failure to deposit the proposed type
strain(s) sufficiently early in the publication
process. Authors will be asked to indicate,
where applicable, whether they already
have confirmation of deposit or whether
they are waiting for it to be provided by the
collections. There will be no third option,
that the proposed type strain(s) has not yet
been deposited!

A link to the online submission
declaration will be provided as part of the
submission process. Once the online form
is completed, processing of the manuscript
will go ahead as usual.

Other changes

An exciting development that is now
quite close to getting under way is the
completion of the entire back run of IJSEM,
in the form of its predecessors JSB and
IBBNT (International Bulletin of
Bacteriological Nomenclature and
Taxonomy), online with HighWire Press in
PDF format back to volume 1, issue 1,
published on 15 January 1951. This process
requires the destructive scanning of
back copies of the journal through a
high-throughput automated scanner.
Thanks to generous donations of back
copies by Micah Krichevsky and Dave
Labeda, we now have a complete run of
the journal back to 1958, and are missing
only volumes 1 to 7 (1951–1957). If any
readers know of copies of these volumes
that might be donated to allow completion
of this project, they should contact Dr Ron
Fraser, Executive Secretary of SGM
(r.fraser@sgm.ac.uk).

Once these back issues have been digitized
and header files prepared (titles, authors
and abstracts), the entire archive will be
mounted in IJSEM Online at HighWire
Press and will be made available free as a
service to continued research in microbial
systematics.

Another development that is on the horizon
is a change to the online submission
system used by IJSEM. The ESPERE system
has served the journal well since its
implementation in 2001, quite early in the
spread of online manuscript submission.
However, the decision has been made to
move to a new system and this is likely to be
implemented in mid 2006. The new
system should give greater back-up to
editors and to reviewers, including the
ability to save incomplete reviewer reports
and to upload reports as word-processor
files, and should further reduce the time
taken for the review of manuscripts. Also
there will be more flexibility in the types of
file that can be uploaded as part of a
submission, and other features will be
added such as the ability to save a
submission part way through and come
back to it later. More news about this
development will be posted on the IJSEM
website as details become available.

The future of IJSEM

Much has been said and written in recent
years about ‘open access’ (OA) to the
research literature, the argument sometimes
oversimplified by OA advocates as ‘since
the taxpayer has paid for researchers to do
the work, why should they pay again for
them to read about it?’ Put more sensibly,
acknowledging that there are costs
associated with journal publication and that
it doesn’t just happen by some mysterious
(but free) ‘osmosis’, the debate centres
around what costs are incurred, whether the
benefits they bring justify those costs and
how the costs should be met.
SGM and the Editorial Board of IJSEM continue to monitor developments in the OA debate. It would be hard to find anyone to dispute the idea that free access to the research literature is a laudable aim. IJSEM already provides entirely free access to the online journal to registered institutions in the 60 poorest countries in the world through the HINARI (World Health Organization) and AGORA (Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN) initiatives, and all online content more than 24 months old is freely available to all (including the digitized archive, when this becomes available). However, it would be equally hard for anyone to deny that the peer-review process and the publication of high-quality, formatted, copy-edited papers, densely linked both internally and also externally to cited references both within the same journal and beyond, with extensive searching capability and other added features, actually costs significant amounts of money (although IJSEM remains extremely good value for money compared with most other similar journals, particularly those produced by commercial publishers, at less than 40 cents per page).

Deciding exactly how this ‘added value’ to the author’s word-processor file is paid for, assuming that the research community continues to regard it as worth paying for, is surely the real challenge for the OA debate. Would it be fairer, for example, as the ‘author pays’ model proposes, for the costs of publication to be borne by those who isolate, characterize and name novel taxa, who are already bearing the costs of performing the experiments in addition to the costs of strain deposition, as well as agreeing to make the type strains available to other systematics researchers? The consumers of this information, the users of the whole system of microbial nomenclature and taxonomy, are a community that extends far beyond the small group of authors who publish in IJSEM and include large and wealthy biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies that very rarely if ever share their research findings through journal publication; should they pay nothing for it?

The whole apparatus of prokaryotic systematics and taxonomy, including not only IJSEM but also the ICSP and its taxonomic subcommittees, as well as depending heavily on the goodwill and time of a small but extremely hard-working and dedicated band of scientists, also costs money to maintain. If the present system is to continue, this money has to come from somewhere. Perhaps the most sensible and sustainable path for the future is to aim for a balance between ‘reader pays’, the current dependence on subscription income, and ‘author pays’, a balance that reflects the benefits that both groups derive from the current system.

One thing in the uncertain world of journal publishing is hard to avoid. If 95% or more of the world’s prokaryotic species remain to be described, the changes outlined here are unlikely to be the last in the publication of IJSEM.

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