Transparency in editorial discretion

The editorial by Balaram (*Curr. Sci.*, 2002, **83**, 101–102) brings out the strengths and limitations of the peer-review system. The two controversial papers of Quist and Chapela, and Pusztai mentioned in the editorial are in one of the most contentious areas of contemporary science and technology. With respect to transgenic plants, opinions are not always based on sound experimental evidences, but more on emotions due to deep-seated beliefs that humans have no business to tinker with the genetic material, or put in other words, 'humans should not play God'. These papers are exceptions to the large numbers of papers published in scientific journals in areas that are not controversial. The confidential referee system may be 'biased, unjust, unaccountable, incomplete, easily fixed, often insulting, usually ignorant, occasionally foolish and frequently wrong' as quoted in the editorial; but majority would agree that it still the best approach. Peer review can be further improved by bringing more transparency in the process. The name of the referees recommending publication can be printed at an appropriate place in the paper, as many journals indicate the name of the 'communicating editor' or 'communicated by'. Most journals send the manuscripts to two or three referees; this policy could be included in the general information to the authors. Suppose the journal seeks the opinion of two referees, two, one and no name would respectively indicate that both, only one, or none of the referees have recommended the paper for publication. In the last case, it would be understood that the Editor has used his own discretion, and a note stating the reasons for his decision can be added. This would still maintain the anonymity of the referee not supporting publication; and make the referees more accountable, especially when recommending a paper for publication. The reputation of the referee will be at stake if he allows some bloomers to pass. Moreover, a good job by the referee would bring him some recognition instead of the frequently-published sentence: 'Authors wish to thank the anonymous referee for suggestions'.

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Need for more open admission policy and meaningful examination system for Ph D in the universities

If there is any study or course in abuse in higher education, it is the doctorate or Ph D course. Some of the colleges of Bihar and UP have departments which produce Ph Ds on a regular basis, in spite of the fact that they lack infrastructural facilities, like relevant books and journals, and research atmosphere. The situation in the colleges of the other states is likely to be more or less similar depending on how far or near these colleges are situated from the university or any research institute. If the government and the universities are really serious about improving overall research in the country, the first thing to be done is to stop research in such colleges.

Another reason for Ph D course being in abuse is the fact that perhaps in all the universities, it is almost a private affair between the supervisor and the student, right from the admission, through monitoring of research, and to a large extent the evaluation of the thesis. The role of the department and the university is only superficial. The faculty of the department do not know whether the student is qualified and deserves to be admitted, whether the problem is worth investigation, and how the research is monitored. Yet another abuse of Ph D course is in the appointment of examiners who may not be experts in the field of the thesis at all. This is perhaps the greatest and the most common abuse and many such cases came to the notice of the author of this letter. The supervisor is solely responsible for this. The panel of examiners submitted by the supervisor is hardly changed by the Head of the Department/Convener of BOS/Research Committee, since none of them is expected to be an expert in all the disciplines of research in the subject. Thus, apart from the reputation of the supervisor and the merit of the student, the different procedures for admission and examination also contribute to the quality of research being different in different universities.

One may suggest the following guidelines to be uniformly adopted by the universities for admission, monitoring and examination of Ph D course.

(1) An admission committee consisting of the supervisor and some of the senior members of the department should examine the application of the prospective candidate and assess him for research work in a formal interview.
(2) The provisionally admitted candidate should give a seminar on any topic of the subject concerned. If the candidate is found wanting in understanding and expression, he may be given another chance to do so after a month after which he is finally rejected or admitted by the same admission committee.
(3) After admission, the candidate has to look for a suitable problem. He gives a lecture after two/three months on the subject of his problem and the methods and techniques that he would adopt for finding a possible solution. He is then registered for Ph D.
(4) He again gives a lecture after two/three years to appraise the depart-

ment of his progress and to invite suggestions from the faculty and research scholars for any improvement.
(5) After the work seemingly is complete, the candidate submits a miniature thesis of about 20–25 pages consisting of experimental gist of the results and a short discussion without any introduction and references, and this must be sent to two examiners.
(6) There would be a viva voce examination after a month of submission of the miniature thesis, in which one of the examiners would be present. In case there are any suggestions from this examiner or from the other in his report for some additional work, it has to be carried out by the candidate and the results brought to the notice of the examiner who made the suggestions. (In the present system of examination for Ph D, the viva voce test held after the approval of the thesis is almost meaningless and serves no purpose from the viewpoint of the examination. One is not aware of any candidate who has been required to reappear for this test or is rejected, once the thesis has been approved.)
(7) It is only after the oral test that the full thesis has to be written and sent to the two examiners for approval. There would be no more oral test after submitting the thesis, but the thesis may be required to be revised, if the examiners are not satisfied. There cannot be any rejection at this stage.

Therefore, to eliminate the abuse of Ph D course as far as possible and to make it more credible, there has to be an open admission policy and more objective system of examination. It would be better if we have a uniform and common policy for the two in the whole country, to enable one to make a possible comparative assessment of Ph Ds from different universities.

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Coverage of Indian life sciences/S&T journals in major global alerting services

There are an estimated half a million serials which qualify as journals or serials published in English and other languages. The current figure in the International Standard Serial Number (ISSN) Register of the ISSN International Centre, Paris, France is 1,035,130 (ref. 1). Most of these contain articles with some original research published in non-English periodicals, although of variable quality. Admittedly, many of them do not qualify for inclusion in the highly competitive secondary information services which demand stringent criteria of quality and standard. Not surprisingly, many journals do not figure in a majority of reputed secondary international databases of periodicals or even in lists of scholarly periodicals brought out by various publishers/agencies. The *Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory 1999*, the premier serials reference source, for example, provides information on 157,173 serials published throughout the world, arranged under 973 subject headings – information gathered from over 80,000 publishers all over the world[2]. The *Directory of Periodicals Published in India 2000* lists bibliographic information on about 12,000 serials, including 681 newspapers[3]. The *Directory of Indian Scientific Periodicals 1992*, brought out by the Indian National Scientific Documentation Centre, New Delhi, lists only 1991 journal titles, including about 120 secondary publications[4].

Despite the impressive number of journals published from India, their coverage in international databases is quite poor. In the five major databases analysed, viz. *EMBASE* (1998), *Index Medicus* (2001), *BIOSIS* (2000), *Science Citation Index* (*SCI*) (2001) and *Journal Citation Reports* (*JCR*)/*SCI* (2001), the coverage of Indian journals varied from 0.27% (10 journals) in the *SCI* to 1.92% (98 journals) in *BIOSIS*; the total number of unique journals being 157. Among these unique journals, only three figured in all the five databases analysed (*Indian Journal of Medical Research*, *Journal of Biosciences* and *National Medical Journal of India*), one journal (*Journal of Environmental Biology*) in four databases, eight journals in three databases, 26 in two and a whopping 119 (75.80%) in only one of the five databases analysed. It is high time that the fortnightly, multidisciplinary journal of research from India, *Current Science*, is indexed selectively for articles relating to the field of biomedicine in the *Index Medicus* database of the National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, USA. This suggestion for consideration is quite reasonable. Besides publishing quite a few articles in the field of biomedicine on a regular basis, *Current Science* has also brought out a number of special issues in the field of biomedicine in the past one decade or so[5].

The coverage of Indian journals in the ISI (http://www.isinet.com) databases, viz. *SCI* and *JCR*, easily the most difficult and most sought-after global secondary information source, is rather poor, because the journal selection process in the ISI databases is extremely rigorous[6]. Therefore, the picture from India is depressing as in 2001, the *SCI* and its companion publication, the *JCR* covered 10 and 45 journals or a mere 0.27 and 0.78% respectively[7,8]. The impact factor (IF) of Indian journals covered in the *JCR* during 2001 varied between 0.000 and 0.657.

With this backdrop, the most practical solution for the low coverage of Indian journals in major global current awareness and alerting services is to initiate some indigenous efforts. For example, the ICMR–NIC Centre for Biomedical