

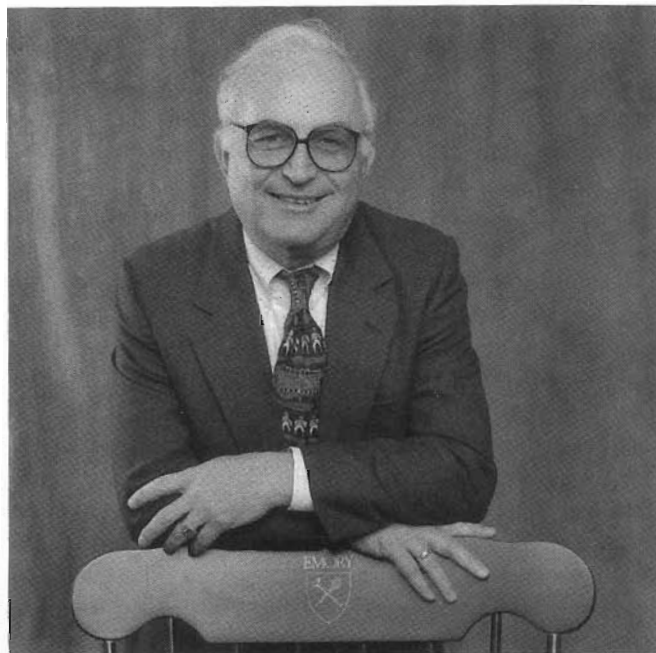
Editorial

A turning point for Restorative Neurology and Neuroscience

As the founding editor of *Restorative Neurology and Neuroscience*, it is a great pleasure to write this editorial introducing the new Editor-in-Chief, Dr. Bernhard Sabel to our readers. Dr. Sabel is Professor of medical psychology at the University of Magdeburg Medical School and he has had a long and highly productive involvement with the field of neural plasticity, restorative neurology and recovery of function. In fact, his recent volume, "Brain Plasticity", edited with Hans-Joachim Freund and Otto Witte, represents one of the best contemporary overviews of basic and clinical research in the field, but is only one of several he has done on this topic (see also Stein and Sabel, 1988 for example). Sabel's current research on restoration of visual functions after optic nerve crush has already received wide-spread international attention.

With respect to RNN, Dr. Sabel has been an active and highly effective member of the Editorial Board since its founding and I can think of only few others who have been more active in promoting the journal on the national and international scene. It is for all of these reasons that I believe that the new leadership he will bring to the journal will ensure its continuing growth and success in what has clearly become a highly exciting field of research in neuroscience. I am also certain that the recent move from Elsevier, North Holland, to a new publisher, IOS Press of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, will prove to be a significant step forward in ensuring the future development of RNN. In preparing to leave the editorship in new hands, I would like to share a few thoughts about the history of RNN and perhaps include a few suggestions about where we might wish to go from here.

The thought of developing an entirely new journal devoted to the topic of central nervous system plasticity and recovery of function began slightly over ten years ago when I initially approached Elsevier to determine their interest in working with me to start a new journal. At first, the publishers at Elsevier rejected the idea on the grounds that there were not enough people working in the field of neural and behavioral plasticity to support a specialty journal of this type. So, for a few years the idea languished. Indeed, for the most part, in the 1960s and 1970s not many people in the field believed that neuronal recovery of function, at least in the central nervous system, was possible, and therefore, there was a resistance to accepting papers purporting to



Dr. Donald G. Stein

show that such 'plasticity' could occur and could be directly manipulated in the adult organism.

By the 1980s research on CNS plasticity began to appear more regularly in highly regarded, peer-reviewed journals; but such articles were scattered over a large number of different journals and did not attract much attention, especially from clinicians. I thought that it would be a good idea to solicit papers covering both basic and clinical research in one journal, devoted specifically to the topic of plasticity, but it was difficult convincing journal publishers to invest in this new venture. Fortunately for RNN, Dr. Nello Spiteri became the new publisher of the neuroscience section at Elsevier. Dr. Nello Spiteri was much more interested in the idea of launching a neuroscience journal which was both international and interdisciplinary. The new journal would be focused around the topic of neural plasticity and recovery of function and encompass both human and animal studies. As the editor, I wanted the journal to include articles that would represent the latest and best in clinical as well as basic research in neural plasticity. I also hoped to publish clinical case studies illustrating examples of new approaches to the

treatment of brain damage that would emphasize outcome measures demonstrating the potential for functional recovery. This was important because by the mid-1980s there was a clear and disturbing trend among neuroscience journal editors to reject any papers whose primary dependent variables were behavioral measures emphasizing behavioral outcome measures.

To help change this situation, I invited an equal number of physician researchers as well as bench neuroscientists to become members of the Editorial Board and I made it editorial policy to give a fair and objective review to any papers having behavioral outcome measures as a part of their experiments. In addition, I felt it was very important to have a substantial, if not equal number of board members from around the world rather than focusing only on our American colleagues. At the time, not all of my colleagues in the United States agreed with this 'international' approach believing that research from abroad often did not meet the same high standards we impose here in the United States, but this was simply not to be the case.

I believed that if the Editorial Board was selective and had outstanding people to serve as reviewers of the submitted papers, quality of the published articles would not be a problem. I have to say that on this point, my judgement proved to be correct. Indeed, very often the international members of the board were tougher and more demanding reviewers of their international colleagues than their American counterparts. I shall always be grateful for the backing of many of my colleagues and friends around the world who were willing to review articles, contribute papers and attend Board meetings in support of RNN's activities and projects.

Looking back over the last 8 years of RNN publication, it is easy to see that the articles reflect the changing character of the explosion of research taking place in the field. The first issue of RNN in 1989 had many articles devoted to neural transplantation, then one of the hottest and most controversial topics engaging the neuroscience community. As we moved forward, the emphasis shifted from neural transplants (although we still continued to publish in this area) to other forms of prosthesis as well as new pharmacological agents, trophic factors and the more molecular/biological techniques of gene transfer. Unfortunately, despite the substantial number of neurologists on the Board, one of the disappointing problems continuing right up to the present was the fact that we were never able to solicit a substantial number of clinical papers in the field of restorative neurology. In fact, the more recent topics of research submitted to RNN began to appear strikingly similar to those found in the more traditional basic research journals and had a strong molecular-biological basis with little or no emphasis on behavior or functional outcomes. For reasons I do not completely understand, the number of clinical studies submitted were well below those in the basic research domain and we were never able to overcome this problem. In contrast, we were successful in receiving solid numbers of international submissions to RNN; although these also, were primarily in the basic research areas.

I would say that Dr. Sabel has his task cut out for him, but I think he is taking all of the right steps to enhance the original, interdisciplinary objectives of Restorative Neurology and Neuroscience. He will have to work hard to obtain a sufficient number of high quality, clinical papers that meet the high standards that he will impose for publication in the journal. He will have to ensure that the board members contribute actively to the journal by submitting their own, cutting-edge papers for objective and anonymous peer-review. Most of the editorial board members are highly renowned and they know that they can publish in the most highly acclaimed journals. I believe that if it is worth having one's name on the masthead of RNN it is also worth submitting the best of one's papers to the journal from time-to-time.

Since the first issue of RNN appeared in 1989, there are many speciality journals now that accept papers on functional recovery and neural plasticity much more readily than was the case a few years ago. This means that the competition for top-quality papers is much more keen. Professor Sabel and the Editorial Board as a group, will have to find new and innovative ways of soliciting high quality papers that would ordinarily be submitted to one or more of these competing journals. The Board and publisher of RNN will also have to give very serious consideration to developing an electronic version of the journal that will allow it to stand with others now providing this service.

One of the great difficulties with having Elsevier as the publisher was that its subscription rates are among the highest of any professional journals that are currently available. Many university and laboratory libraries are no longer in a position to pay hundreds of dollars for 'niche' journals that do not have a large constituency or readership. This is why an electronic version of RNN has to be given serious consideration. The price of shipment, paper, storage and distribution can be much more effectively controlled and thereby the journal can be made more accessible to a larger audience. Publishing the titles and abstracts of future RNN articles on the WEB would also help to promote the journal around the world.

Finally, I should mention some of the joys and frustrations that I experienced over the last decade in getting RNN up and running. First of all, it was a lot of fun to start something totally new and to see the journal materialize and become recognized around the world. Second, it was a wonderful opportunity for me to meet and get to know new colleagues and develop new friendships around the world. My correspondence with many (but honestly, not all) of the authors submitting papers often represented a wonderful opportunity to exchange ideas and learn, firsthand, what was new and exciting in the field of restorative neurology and perhaps, through the journal, to provide more credibility and exposure of ideas that might not have been published in some of the more traditional, molecularly oriented periodicals. I was glad to give an opportunity to authors from around the world who might not have had an easy time in finding suitable reviewers with the patience and understand-

ing to help those whose first language was not English; having a substantial, international board really helped with the process and made my job much easier. There were some minor frustrations as well. The most frustration came from the fact that there was often disagreement over what constitutes an “acceptable” article. I would have to say that over 50 % of the articles reviewed would have completely diametric outcomes, with one reviewer recommending acceptance with minor revision while the other recommended outright rejection. Reconciling these diverging views was a difficult and often sensitive task because I did not want to make my referees feel that I was ignoring their carefully considered advice by doing one thing or the other; either of which would have been wrong depending upon whose perspective it was. When I could not get the Board members to agree, I had to make the final editorial decision. For the most part though, I resolved the situation by asking two board members and one outside referee to review the reports. I believe that this is an equitable system but there were still some who were not always satisfied with the outcome. Over the years I learned that an editor needs highly developed political as well as editorial and scientific skills! Another frustrating task is trying to figure out how to get your reviewers to provide their comments in a timely fashion. Here is where one needs to have a really good managing editor, and in this regard I was very lucky to find Dr. Judy Steinman who taught me much in the early stages of RNN. When she left academia, I was again fortunate that my wife Darel was willing

to take charge and keep things flowing with her gentle reminders. I believe that RNN might not have survived without their help and I owe them much thanks for the work that they did during the formative years of RNN.

It is really a nice feeling now to step down from this job knowing that RNN can only grow and become even better. I want to take this opportunity to thank everyone for the wonderful job that they have done in creating the journal and keeping it going through the difficult times. It is an honor to have played a role in this endeavor and I will very much look forward to my ‘emeritus’ role at RNN. It will give me much pleasure to watch the growth in impact and respect that RNN will achieve as we move into the next millennium. However, the most personal satisfaction will come from learning that one of the excellent articles published in the journal will lead to a breakthrough in helping the victims of CNS injury lead a more normal life. Under Dr. Sabel’s guidance and with the continued help of an outstanding editorial board, I have little doubt that this will soon be the case. Something along the lines that plasticity research hopefully would benefit from RNN and that through this activity we can perhaps help patients with neurological disorders.

Donald G. Stein, Ph.D.
Emory University
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
Atlanta, Georgia 30328
USA