

ABSTRACTS

Contemplation of the broader aspects of the abstracting service of THE JOURNAL has been induced by two things which have occurred in recent months. The first is the rehabilitation of our corps of Contributing Editors (see following note), each of whom has agreed to supply, among other things, abstracts of articles on leprosy published in his area. The other thing is an inquiry—made at the instance of an expert committee of UNESCO (see the preceding editorial)—from a Committee on Abstracting Services, of the International Federation for Documentation, about the policies of THE JOURNAL with respect to its abstracts.

No attempt has ever been made to set up any specific rules for the guidance of our collaborators. No thought of a *definition* has been entertained beyond such as is to be found in standard dictionaries, as that in Stedman's medical dictionary: A condensation or summary of an address or literary article; also, To condense or abbreviate an article or paper; or that in Webster's International: That which compresses or concentrates in itself the essential qualities of a larger thing or of several things;

specifically, a summary or an epitome, as of a book, or of a statement; (brief, abridgement, synopsis, digest).

We do, on the other hand, use a *classification* of abstracts with respect to their sources. This is: (1) contributed items, sent in by Contributing Editors or by the authors themselves; (2) original-source items, authors' summaries and the like taken from original publications in which the articles themselves are included; (3) reprinted items, taken from other periodical's publications in which they appeared as abstracts only; and (4) editor-prepared items, involving actual preparation beyond that of routine editorial nature. No more will be said of this matter at this time.

The questionnaire of the International Federation for Documentation brought forth distinctions and definitions not previously seen by us as regards the policy of the abstracting service in general, and the specific kinds of abstracts used. It asked if our service undertakes to cover the field "selectively" or "comprehensively," explaining that a *selective* service selects for abstracting only those publications and articles which it regards as making valuable contributions to knowledge, or as likely to be of use to a specific class of reader, whereas a *comprehensive* service undertakes to abstract every publication and article appearing in its subject field which contains original or valuable material. With respect to the character of the abstracts themselves, the questionnaire asked (a) whether they are "critical" or "noncritical," and (b) whether they are supposed to be "indicative" or "informative"; and it was explained that an *indicative* abstract is a short one written with the intention to enable the reader to decide whether or not he should read the original article or publication, whereas an *informative* abstract summarizes the principal arguments and gives the principal data of the original publication or article. The answers which were given to these questions are set forth here as a declaration of policy and principles, in part so that our Contributing Editors may be guided in their efforts to aid in attaining the desired objective.

The first consideration is that THE JOURNAL undertakes to cover the field of leprosy *comprehensively*. Although each of the men who prepare or otherwise procure the abstracts has his own special interests, as has each individual reader, they all realize the necessity of service to all readers. The Current Literature section should be a comprehensive source of reference material, to which end we have at times even published lists of papers not

abstracted, and in being that it will also be a directory of men who are concerned with leprosy and its problems to the extent of writing about them.

This statement is made with full consciousness of how far, even at our best, we have fallen short in accomplishment in the past. Our reference file for the years 1939 to 1941 contains 1374 individual cards, of which 136 pertain to articles published as originals or reprinted in THE JOURNAL. Of the remaining 1238 articles, no less than 586—47%—had not been abstracted in our pages. It is true that many of them were too incidental or noncontributory to justify that attention, but it is entirely probable that many worth while papers were missed by our service.

As for the type of abstracts which we intend to present, it does not suffice merely to say that they are supposed, or preferred, in the main to be *noncritical*, which is to say *objective*, for the matter is not at all simple. In the first place, the very manner in which an abstractor deals with an article is liable to reveal his personal attitude toward it, and he may deliver a crushing criticism by dismissing it with no more than a brief "indicative" statement. The question, however, is involved with the purpose that our abstracts shall be mainly "*informative*" rather than merely indicative, because so many of our readers are located where they cannot readily obtain the original articles to examine. But it would be futile, and wasteful, to prepare and print detailed abstracts of articles which do not set forth new facts or reasoned views which would contribute to the knowledge or understanding of the reader group—in other words, to paraphrase the Committee's definition, which do not contain original or valuable material.

Hence judgment has to be exercised in determining what articles should be dismissed with a brief indicative statement; but the scales should be loaded somewhat—not too much so—in favor of the informative type. In deciding against that type an abstractor will usually supply only a brief indicative statement, but he will on occasion be quite justified in dismissing an article with a critical comment; and it would be better to do that than to ignore it entirely. A reader may find interest in a title, but if the paper itself does not contain any real contribution he should have an indication of that fact.

There is, however, one essential rule, namely, that the type of abstract which pretends or appears to be objective should definitely not have interpolated remarks of the abstractor not identified as such. After all, there are more appropriate places than the Current Literature section for an abstractor—or editor—to set forth his personal views or experience. When the circumstances are such that it seems justifiable to introduce such

remarks, they must be clearly set apart from the abstract proper, in the brackets of editorial practice and preferably at the end.

One might sum up the whole matter by saying that the abstracts should be *adequate*, and that what is adequate has to be decided in each case. It may be pointed out that merely to copy the summary and conclusions of the original article is not necessarily sufficient. In fact, taken alone they are often utterly inadequate to inform the reader what was done or observed to lead the author to his conclusions.

All in all, proper abstracting is not simple work. It requires familiarity with the subject involved, a balanced critical judgment, skill in summary presentation, and appreciation of responsibility to both authors and readers—and to the periodical with which one is collaborating.

—H. W. W.