

The Belgian Society of Paediatrics and its Journals

Willem Proesmans

Paediatric nephrologist. Emeritus Professor KU Leuven

willem.proesmans@kuleuven.be

Keywords

Belgian Journal of Paediatrics; history.

The Belgian Society of Paediatrics was founded in 1923 supposedly with the title in French only - as was the tradition in Belgium for all kinds of societies those days - namely *Société Belge de Pédiatrie*. Little information is available today on the number of members or the programs of the annual meetings.

After the second world war, in 1946, a journal was created, this time with a Latin title: *Acta Paediatrica Belgica*. This choice possibly made it more comfortable for both Dutch and French speaking Belgian paediatricians to collaborate. Yet, at this time, there were only few medical doctors working as paediatricians and most of them were French speaking working mainly in private practices in Brussels, the capital of the country with French as the increasingly popular language. In contrast, the Society acquired in addition to its original name a bilingual name: *Société Belge de Pédiatrie* (SBP) besides *Belgische Vereniging voor Kindergeneeskunde* (BVK). Both denominations are still in use to this very day.

With increasing numbers of paediatricians, the journal became a bilingual one with French remaining the dominant language for publications and announcements. It is impossible to judge its qualities, impact and popularity by standards of today. There were 4 issues a year and this was still the situation in the late sixties when the Department of Paediatrics at the Leuven University took an important initiative.

Acta Paediatrica incorporated in the European Journal of Pediatrics

After a short but brilliant career in Congo - the former Belgian colony named Zaire by Mobutu some years later - professor Roger Eeckels became head of the Department of Paediatrics at the Leuven University Hospital in 1969 to replace professor Pierre Denys who had died that year. R. Eeckels aimed at a strong collaboration not only among the different Belgian universities in both parts of the country, but also between universities in neighbouring countries especially The Netherlands, Germany and The United Kingdom. Moreover, he judged the *Acta Paediatrica Belgica* out of key with modern times. He was lucky to get acquainted with Jürgen Spranger, *Direktor der Kinderklinik of Mainz*. As the forward-looking editor in chief of the *Zeitschrift für Kinderheilkunde* he decided to transform it into an English journal named *European Journal of Pediatrics* (EJP) which he launched in 1975 with the aim of fulfilling its promising title. To achieve this goal, he laboured for a progressive incorporation of a large number of national journals published in most West European countries, the first such journal included being the Hungarian Pediatric Journal. R. Eeckels was enthused about the idea and the invitation to join this venture. He was, however, not sure whether the Belgian paediatricians would be prepared or eager to deliver papers of high quality for the new journal.

He therefore started a survey among his university colleagues and suggested them to submit, in their language of choice, good quality papers to the *Acta Paediatrica Belgica*. R. Eeckels was a true polyglot, being exceptionally competent in medical Dutch, French and English. He decided not only to translate all new submissions into English but also to write for each one a referee's report with suggestions for improvement

in case of adequate potential. Despite some reluctance he succeeded to publish, as the new editor, 4 volumes of the kind starting in 1978.

The time was ripe for the next step. In 1982 *Acta Paediatrica Belgica* was given up and officially incorporated into the EJP. Accordingly, the EJP became the official journal of the Belgian Society of Paediatrics (BVK/SBP). R. Eeckels joined the editorial board as assistant editor.

The birth of the Mini Acta Belgica (1982-1998)

This transition was not immediately supported by all members of the BVK/SBP. To the surprise of many colleagues and friends it turned out to be a perilous undertaking. Even within the Leuven Department of Paediatrics there was some reluctance. It was felt that many paediatricians were not sufficiently familiar with the English medical terminology to read the journal or to publish their work. There was another problem of financial nature. The BVK/SBP had been supported quite substantially and for ages by the pharmaceutical industry, especially the milk-producing companies in Belgium and surrounding countries. Since J. Spranger decided not to include any publicity in the EJP, the leaders of the BVK/SBP experienced this loss of income as collateral damage.

Professor Lucien Corbeel was an inspired and experienced paediatrician with a double belonging. He combined a parttime supervisorship for infectious diseases at the Leuven University Hospital with a private practice in Vilvoorde, nearby Brussels. Moreover, he had been very active in the BVK/SBP and an efficient mediator for all kinds of Belgian struggles since he had an excellent command of both national languages. Most of all, he personally managed to publish personally quite regularly on topics of general interest in French journals by preference. He found the end of the *Acta Paediatrica Belgica* most regrettable. In spite of his high esteem for R. Eeckels he decided to go on with the business as usual for the BVK/SBP by creating on his own initiative what he called "*The Mini Acta*" for which he organized both the scientific and the financial sides of the undertaking as the editor. This was very much appreciated mainly by the pharmaceutical companies as well as by most paediatricians in private practice. The contribution of publicity enabled the editor to deliver the small journal to all Belgian paediatricians for free. Surprisingly, L. Corbeel further contributed on a regular basis to the EJP as a reviewer or a co-author.

Tijdschrift van de Belgische Kinderarts / Journal du Pédiatre Belge

When in 1999 I was elected President of the BVK/SBP I had two projects one for the Society another for its journal. To start with, it was felt that the *Mini Acta* was not only a misnomer but also a mixed blessing for the Society which deserved better given the arrival of many more specialized members of staff in most Belgian universities. In contrast to this, the number of subscriptions to the EJP remained low despite the advantageous fee for members of the BVK/SBP. Thirdly, there was a clear tendency for choosing a French journal as an alternative especially in the ranks of the French-speaking colleagues.

My first proposal to transform the Mini Acta into a bilingual journal with a professional editorial staff was accepted. We gave the journal again a double name: *Tijdschrift van de Belgische Kinderarts / Journal du Pédiatre Belge*. It was rather easy to find motivated collaborators to support L. Corbeel as editor and the first issue of the new volume was published in 1999. The older generation felt this was like a revival of the good old *Acta Paediatrica Belgica*.

My second proposal was to consolidate the combination of membership of the BVK/SBP on the one hand and subscription to the EJP. Springer Verlag made the subscription cheaper and the Society should empower this project among the members. The board agreed as did most influential academic staff members.

In the meantime, a new editorship was created for the EJP: it was a shared job by myself and professor Beat Steinman from the *Kinderspital* in Zürich. This position was a great opportunity for me to make the deal become successful. I also invited two colleagues from two different Belgian universities to join me in the Leuven editorial office. By doing so a substantial effort was made to improve the journal in several ways. Within a short time, more papers were submitted and the number of publications increased accordingly in spite of our policy to be more critical than our predecessors. I introduced several new types of papers in order to attract more authors. Papers entitled **Eponyms** summarized origin and new aspects of well-known syndromes. **What is new?** became the title for invited papers on recent advances in the knowledge of a great variety of disorders. **Short Reports** were meant to replace the too many Case Reports of questionable value. **Clinical Practice** aimed at bringing into the journal the experience of many renown authors from all over the world with according contributions. Finally, a section of papers entitled **Teaching papers** was created with the same intention. Clinical Practice articles were especially popular since they dealt with topics for which very little or no evidence-based material was available

In less than two years the number of pages was doubled. In fact, this was disadvantageous since increasing the number of pages brings about a decrease of the so-called impact factor (IF). When I started in 1999, the impact factor was 0.93 and when I left the editorial board in 2014 it was 1.96. In comparison, the IF of the *Archives of Diseases in Childhood* – just to mention one famous academic journal on General Paediatrics – roughly tripled from 1.7 in 1999 to 5.2 in 2022. In that year, my successor as editor in chief of the EJP, P. Dewinter, obtained IF-score of 3.6 for which he deserves congratulations.

Thanks to L. Corbeel, the new Belgian bilingual Journal was quite successful. Its first volume appeared in 1999. Belgian paediatricians could submit papers in the language of their preference and the journal was free of charge. Yet the younger generation of academic paediatricians felt this was not what they wanted in the light of the “publish or perish” challenge they were facing with. Additional concerns were how to cope with modern technology, the abundance of journals worldwide with easy access and the everlasting linguistic problems typical for the Belgian society. Last but not least, in theory the EJP was still the official organ of the BVK/SBP but in real life there was little flesh on the bone. When L. Corbeel became ill and had to abandon his many tasks, some of his collaborators came up with what they considered a better alternative.

The Belgian Journal of Paediatrics: 2015

Although I was not involved in this process, it looks like there was more enthusiasm than ever among the many institutions involving paediatricians and the care for sick children. Leuven played a key role with doctor Marc Raes who was joined by professor Samy Cadranet staff member at *L'Hôpital Universitaire de l'Enfant* in Brussels and a passionate personality in many of his activities especially within the BVK/SBP. The name chosen for the new Journal was *Belgian Journal of Paediatrics* (BJP) which would become the official journal of the Society. There was an immediate support by the pharmaceutical companies and the publisher of the former format took over. Members of the BVK/BSP have access not only to the new journal but also to a series of journals all around the world. The first edition dates from 2015. There are 4 volumes a year and the publications cover the broad field of Paediatrics. All academic institutions from all parts of the

country participate in publishing. It remains however an almost exclusive Belgian journal which is a mixed blessing.

I cannot further comment on the teething troubles of this journal and the obvious progress made. I only want to end this contribution by formulating some general remarks and recommendations although my personal experience is outdated and the recent revolutions, both medical and digital, transcend me.

Reflexions

Can some lessons be taken from the past history of the BVK/SBP and its journals? Generally speaking, if a country has a national Society for Paediatrics, it is natural and desirable to have a journal of its own, the minimal goal being a tool for communication, information and teaching. Such a journal should be linked to membership and the fee for members should include access to the journal. The journal might take advantage from some independency in that the editor is not the president of the Society and the editorial board is constituted of a large group of experts in the field. There is a need for reviewers who provide professional and respectful criticism. They should make the editor's work easier by offering ways to improve the value of the manuscript. Reviewers from abroad are essential. The utmost goal is to provide a journal which is attractive in many ways.

A good example of such a conceptual construction is, I believe, the *Archives of Diseases in Childhood*, the official journal of the *Royal College of Paediatrics*. The question is whether the journal should be an exclusive publication tool for paediatricians working in the country at stake. The problem is to be attracted by potential authors from outside the country. A concern is to find reviewers capable of the work requested.

My experience is limited to the editorial work for the EJP. The major challenges have been to stimulate authors from Belgium and abroad - inviting them did partially resolve the problem, to find motivated and earnest reviewers - and some indeed were brilliant and to offer help for people with a poorly written manuscript carrying an interesting message. To my surprise, many famous authors were poor reviewers and vice versa.

Yet, Belgium is a small and complicated country in every way. There is the language controversy, there are cultural differences between the populations of the north and the south and there is a lot of competition between the many universities. Therefore, general rules are not necessarily applicable when dealing with such an undertaking as establishing a national society and a journal. Therefore, paediatricians should be supportive as well as understanding of those colleagues, courageous enough to put their shoulders under the matter.

The BJP has some imperfections that could be overcome by rather simple technical tools. Each volume is overloaded. The letters are very small and hard to read for older people. The tables as well as the figures are unattractive carrying too much information in a difficult to analyse presentation. A more problematic issue is the length of the manuscripts; in general, they are too long which damages their attractiveness.

My last comment is about the common thread throughout my story on the BVK/SBP and its Journal. The BVK/SBP struggled with title and format of its journal. The choice for the Latin name was, in my view, an ingenious solution for multilingual countries. It is no surprise that the same choice was made for instance in Switzerland (*Helvetica Paediatrica Acta*). Mini-Acta was a rather unfortunate way to cope with the hypothetical fear of losing national identity when progressive academic paediatricians made a praiseworthy attempt to incorporate the Belgian journal into an European project. I am convinced that the BVK/BSP missed an opportunity. When the European project was abandoned, the bilingual name came back together with publications in both Dutch and French. The choice did not satisfy the Belgian academic paediatrician and a logic final (?) choice was made for an English name. The new name implies that the BJP is open to a broader audience than the Belgian paediatrician but I am not sure this is the purpose of the actual editorial board. In my view, it is mainly aiming at stimulating publications by young Belgian paediatricians and this is a respectable target in its own. There is still work to be done and quite some creativity will be needed. I sincerely hope for further progress in spite of the increasing complexity of the medical world and the birth of the unpredictable new player in the field called AI.