



COMMENTARY



A revolutionary joins the establishment: *Reproductive Biomedicine Online* turns 20

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ABSTRACT

This commentary highlights the publishing revolution achieved by Robert Edwards in founding *Reproductive Biomedicine Online*. It corrects some inaccuracies in the account given by Roger Gosden in his recently published book *Let There Be Life: An Intimate Portrait of Robert Edwards and His IVF Revolution*.

In his recent 319-page biography of Robert Edwards, *Gosden (2019)* charts at length the arduous and tortuous journey undertaken by Bob in the quest for his 'IVF revolution'. Less well known by many is that this exceptional individual was also a publishing pioneer, responsible for a very different type of revolution: a publishing revolution, worthy of more than just a few pages.

Nick Hopwood's recent Commentary (*Hopwood, 2020*) in this journal highlighted some 'poetic licence' in Roger Gosden's book (*Gosden, 2019*), prompting me to correct some inaccuracies in the chapter entitled 'Spread the Good News' relating to Bob Edwards' publishing activities. I write as someone who worked closely with Professor Bob Edwards for over 20 years (1989–2010); in particular, I have intimate personal knowledge relating to the start-up and development of *Reproductive BioMedicine Online (RBMO)* since I, together with Caroline Blackwell and Bob, formed the small team responsible for its creation. Gosden

correctly recounts events leading up to Bob's split from the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology in 1999 (p.292) and his decision to start up another journal independent of *Human Reproduction* and Oxford University Press; it is pertinent here that Caroline and I were inspired by Bob's revolutionary plans. Sensing the challenge of a unique mould-breaking opportunity, we both decided to follow Bob in his adventure, despite the obvious risks. It was a journey into the unknown for all three of us, but our leader's self-belief was enough. Just as Gosden mostly ignored historical sources (*Hopwood, 2020, p.606*), he also ignored available information about some of the start-up history of *RBMO* (*Bennett, 2010; 2011*), and unfortunately failed to request any historical information from me.

As Executive Editor from 2000 to 2010, I was totally involved in the start-up of *RBMO*, from helping to choose the journal name, to personally acquiring domain names, establishing copyright and trade marks, setting up the office

computing equipment, establishing the online platform, setting up online subscription payments, marketing, handling reprint and subscription sales, negotiating advertising sales, managing the production of the journal (including adjudication, copy-editing, page setting for print, page formatting for online publication) and initiating contracts for design, printing and distribution of the hard copy. All this was done in-house, sub-contractors for production only becoming involved gradually from 2003. Meanwhile, Caroline was organizing from scratch a totally new refereeing system whilst simultaneously coping with all of Bob's correspondence, personal and for *RBMO*, plus his international invitations and extensive travel arrangements. Furthermore, this was all accomplished in a small dusty stable on Bob's farm, barely big enough to hold our three desks, computers, printer and server. The move into the (by contrast) palatial top floor office of a converted barn (*Gosden, p.293*) did not happen until 2004, 4 years later. So, far from the start-up involving 'one assistant' (*Gosden, p.294*) and

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Bob himself being 'manager' (and by implication, the doer), the act of setting up the business and all its systems was achieved by Caroline and myself, with Bob encouraging and inspiring us all the while. Further details of the innovations achieved, the timing of developments and their correct dates have been documented (Bennett, 2010). Of course, the vision was entirely Bob's and he was 'at the helm' (Gosden, p.293) as Editor but, technically, he was not even the Publisher; Bob had formed a company – Reproductive Healthcare Ltd. – to publish the journal, and this company continues to own the journal and its offspring (*Reproductive Biomedicine & Society online*, launched with open access in 2015).

There are other assertions made by Gosden that it is opportune to correct here: firstly, Bob had known for some time that online publication was possible as he had discussed the subject at length with young faculty members from Cambridge University whom he met over lunch on most Fridays in Churchill College, just a few miles from the editorial offices at Moor Barns Farmhouse. Such interactions were far more congenial and more Bob's style than the University Computing Centre (Gosden, p.293). Therefore, though the driving ambition was for the new journal to be 'web-based', the need to maintain publication in hard copy was paramount in 2000; at that time, delivering scientific and medical content digitally was in its infancy and we knew that many potential readers still preferred to receive hard copy. Thus, we provided content to them in tandem, both online and in print. The author photos and biographies were secondary to the true 'novelty' (Gosden, p.294) of *RBMO*, which was to publish abstracts of submissions immediately online, to ensure speedy refereeing and then publishing full accepted papers online within a few weeks of acceptance, the print version following several weeks or months later. This was in complete contrast to its direct competitors as well as all other international journals.

Secondly, although the aspiration may have been to make all the content entirely open access (Gosden, p.293), this was never voiced in my hearing, and of course would have been an impossible dream at the start. Gosden asks '...who would buy it?' and intimates that authors or their organizations were

asked to pay up front to publish in the journal (Gosden, p.294). This is entirely untrue: the only thing authors were asked to finance was printing of colour figures, the reason being that colour printing charges were much higher than black and white. However, subscriptions were scaled according to whether the reader required delivery to be online-only (cheapest), print only or online and print (most expensive), and all three options were offered. Now, 20 years on, the journal has grown up; it is published under contract by a publishing company (Elsevier) and many of its articles are made open access.

Thirdly, regarding the funding: the start-up capital was amassed by investments from himself and eight (not 12) of Bob's trusted colleagues and friends, making a total of only £294,090 rather than £400,000 (p.293). Further capital was requested and provided from founders when it became clear that more liquidity was needed, and more 'founders' were invited to join the group as investors in subsequent years when it became clear that funds were inadequate. The journal was a victim of its own success as Bob was highly successful at encouraging high-quality manuscript submissions from researchers, embryologists and clinicians all over the world, with the result that the submission rate increased almost exponentially. Whilst ensuring plenty of material was available for publication, it soon became clear that Bob's forté was not finance or 'business' as such, correctly intimated by Gosden (p.289). I well remember attending a breakfast business meeting with him in Cambridge around 2003 after which he turned to me and said: 'Business is easy'. The sheer volume of material to process and publish caused costs to run ahead of income and once again, as he had done previously (Gosden, 2019), Bob ended up digging into his own pocket to support the company.

In conclusion, Bob was truly a publishing innovator, tireless in his wish to educate, inspire and disseminate information. As founder and advocate for *RBMO*, he lived to see it through its difficult birth, childhood and adolescence, as it became an established journal in its field. Successful and enduring, *RBMO* is now 20 years old and is a fully mature adult. Ahead of its time, it is not an overstatement that the creation of *RBMO* really shook up the reproductive

medicine publication industry. Conceived and initiated against all the odds, this achievement was made by an extraordinary individual at the age of 75. It was a privilege to have assisted him in the endeavour.

ADDENDUM

Gosden refers repeatedly to the first edition of *A Matter of Life* (Edwards and Steptoe, 1980). Readers may also be interested to read the second edition of *A Matter of Life* (Edwards and Steptoe (Eds), 2012), published online in 2012 and edited by Ruth Edwards and Andrew Steptoe; the preface, postscript and photographs included in it are not in the first edition.

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