

## EDITORIAL

### Writing with impact

Another year draws to a close; another edition of the *South African Actuarial Journal* emerges. It may seem an automatic process, but it is always interesting, come September and October, to guess how much material will be included in the final copy as authors and editors scramble to complete sound drafts.

I hope that readers find this an interesting and useful set of papers. I particularly encourage you to read submissions that fall outside of your natural area of interest. Perhaps this appeal reflects a nervousness that too many of our readers page quickly for interest and then discard the copy or allow it to beautify their bookshelves.

So my attention turns to the question of readability. How can our authors and editorial team capture readers, turning potentially dull subjects into engaging reads?

#### **Quality is not to be compromised**

The *SAAJ* has reached its fifteenth year. It is a publication of good standing with a determined commitment to upholding the principles of independent peer review resulting in papers of high quality. The advisory panel of the *Journal* would tolerate nothing less.

So quality is not to be compromised. Probably the most important decision that we editors make concerning any draft submitted to the *Journal* concerns the selection of scrutineers. Once that is done, and the scrutineers have agreed to take on the substantial task of considering the suitability of that draft for this publication, we are largely in their hands. We need to manage contradictions between scrutineers from time to time but peer review in essence means that we trust the reasoned opinions of our expert reviewers.

That means that we turn down submissions. I sympathise with authors who've had their drafts declined. I cannot imagine it an easy experience. We do it because papers that do not demonstrate the quality we are looking for, or at least the potential for that quality, should not be in the *Journal*.

That quest for quality appears to be yielding fruit. We've had a number of submissions from outside South Africa this year, one of which is included in the 2015 publication. We enjoy a diverse readership. In the year to the end of August 2015, the *Journal* website experienced 830 page views on specific papers, of which 137 concerned papers from past

issues. Key, however, is that the site was accessed from users in 130 different countries, 34 of them in Africa. People are coming to us from the proverbial far and wide.

When we have accepted the quality and relevance of a paper, we focus on the writing. What is the point of a publication full of papers that are never read for lack of clear messaging? Crucial to an attractive message, in my view, is the expression of its purpose.

### **Golden Thread**

Purpose is what makes a story worth telling. This is true whether the narrative is a fireside tale, an epic novel or an academic paper. In a good paper, a thesis is presented and the research that follows either supports it or demonstrates an alternative conclusion. That research may also show the need for further investigation.

The manuscripts that I found hardest to read were not necessarily those that were long or complex, but those that failed to present clear purpose. Good papers not only put forward their reason for existence but guide readers through their storyline, weaving their golden thread of purpose in a way that keeps the reader engaged. Good papers find ways to make even the most difficult arguments or mathematics interesting because they are located within that purpose.

If purpose is mandatory, perhaps application follows not far behind. Not long ago I had the extraordinary experience of visiting, in the middle of the Mpumalanga countryside on a hot, windy October day, two pay-out points for South Africa's social grants. It is an experience that I will not forget easily. The security vans arrived with their cash, beneficiaries formed a queue and within minutes a village had erected itself. Cloth, chickens, offal, special ointments and funeral policies were available. Pick-ups brought elderly ladies in wheelchairs. Women came with their young children. Colour had been added to my sense of purpose.

I knew the academic research that demonstrated the value of social grants at the level of the household. I had read all about the evidence that old-age grants send grandchildren to school, especially if both grant recipient and grandchild are female. I understood the arguments against creating a dependency on the social grant system. All of these I had in my head. What I experienced on that hot day almost against the fence of the National Park was the taste and sounds of the social-grant system. I knew some of the purpose; I had tasted and heard a little of the application, bringing purpose to life.

### **Put Your Audience First**

Dear writer, if you cannot engage your audience by striking a chord with your reader, no matter what you would like to share with them, then you need to ask yourself whether it is worth writing at all. Present your purpose, show how you arrive at your conclusion, and then explain why it matters. Clear, purposeful papers have a much better chance of finding their way through the assessment of quality and into the publication.