This month, the two flagship biology journals of BioMed Central, *Journal of Biology* and *BMC Biology*, join forces under the title *BMC Biology*, as a journal whose aim is to maintain and develop the strengths of both. We have chosen the title *BMC Biology* not as a signal of the predominance of that journal over *Journal of Biology*, but to affirm the connection of the fused publication with BioMed Central, and its close relationship with its sibling journals of the BMC series (see [1]). But we like the genetic principle of codominance; and of course hybrid vigor.

That said, the fused publication will look and behave more like *Journal of Biology* than *BMC Biology* in most ways. We shall continue to publish the topical and authoritative review and comment that have regularly appeared in *Journal of Biology*, which will also bring its publication policy and speed of response to the fused journal (more on policy below). But listing on the Web of Science and Journal Citation Record will be as *BMC Biology*.

In combining two journals, we are swimming against the tide of ever-proliferating new journals, a point remarked by Gregory Petsko in a Comment [2] written for us to mark the occasion and in which, with the verve and effrontery with which regular readers of his column in our sister journal *Genome Biology* will be familiar, he deplores such proliferation – inviting, perhaps, dissent. But we agree of course that this particular fusion is rational.

In the combined journal, what is new, and what is not?

**What’s new**

To launch the new *BMC Biology*, we are publishing the first in an occasional series of special question-and-answer features, in which we invite biologists with a strong personal view on a subject of topical interest or fundamental importance to record a video interview which is posted online with the edited text, and so can be viewed or read, or both, according to preference. Our first interviewee is Martin Raff, the founding Editor-in-Chief of *Journal of Biology* and member of the Editorial Board of the fused journal. He speaks on autism [3], in which he developed a passionate interest when his grandson was diagnosed at a year and a half as autistic, and tackles issues ranging from the promise of genomic and induced stem cell technologies to the reasons for the apparent increase in incidence.

The next Video Q&A, to be posted in May, will be from John Mattick, on the importance and roles of noncoding RNA - just as passionate, and - at least as concerns his perspective on biology - just as personal.

We also have a new emblematic image (Figure 1).

**What’s not**

*BMC Biology* and *Journal of Biology* between them have been committed to the publication of biological research papers of sufficient interest or importance to justify drawing them to the attention of a broad general readership, and papers selected for publication in the fusion journal will reflect, by and large, the selection criteria of
both parents, so that the range of papers published will
be greater than for either.
But although some papers are undoubtedly more
worthy of general attention than others, biology, in the
main, has become so specialized, and biologists so
focused, that there are few research papers that can be
comfortably read, still less properly appreciated, by
people much outside their immediate field. Journal of
Biology has addressed this paradox of the so-called
general journal by publishing short commentaries, which
it has called minireviews, with two functions. For those
papers selected for publication in the journal for their
exceptional interest or importance, it has published a
commentary explaining the significance of the paper for
nonspecialists. Papers making a significant but less
striking contribution, including not only many published
by BMC Biology, but also a selection of those published in
other journals published by BioMed Central, have been
the stimulus for minireviews giving a more general
perspective on the issues they reflect or address. This will
continue in the new BMC Biology, except that the two
functions of the minireviews will be explicit in two
different names: those on papers of exceptional interest
will be called ‘Focus’, and those with a broader remit will
be called ‘Commentary’.

More of the same, with an experimental twist
Journal of Biology will also bring to the fusion its policy
(already shared in part with BMC Biology) of taking
advice from Editorial Board members on the suitability in
principle of submitted papers for the journal before send­
ing them to referees, so that referees are asked to judge
only the technical soundness of the paper, and not its
level of interest. Authors may, as before, choose to
enquire in advance of submission whether their paper
will seem as interesting to the journal’s advisors and
editors as it does to them.
A more unconventional contribution to the editorial
policy of the fused journal will be the transfer intact from
Journal of Biology of its re-review opt-out experiment [4].
This was conceived to address a widespread disgrun­
tlement with current behavioral tendencies of referees,
memorably compared in a Comment article by Virginia
Walbot in Journal of Biology [5] to those of pit bulls; and
to restore a greater share of the responsibility for the
quality of the published paper to its authors. The
rationale for and operation of re-review opt-out are
explained in the editorial [4] we published when we
started the experiment, and I will not recapitulate them
in detail here. But the essential point is that when authors
revise a paper in response to referees (this applies only
to revisions, not to resubmissions), they may choose
whether the referees are consulted again before
publication. We said we would continue the experiment
for as long as it was having no clearly adverse effect on
our ability to maintain the quality of published papers.
This has not happened to date, and we will report back
when that changes, or after six months of experience
with the fusion journal, whichever is the sooner.

Hairballs revisited, the hope of progress, and the
diversity of Q&As
For the inauguration of the Journal of Biology-BMC
Biology fusion, we are launching a new series – ‘The
hope of progress’ – on biology relevant to clinical problems. I
have already mentioned our Video Q&A with Martin
Raff, which is a special contribution to the series: the two
other Hope of progress launch features are reviews on
biology-based cancer therapy [6] and on vaccine
adjuvants [7], and they are introduced in an accompany­
ing editorial [8], in which some of the issues of psychiatric
genomics raised by Martin Raff are briefly discussed.

Our other Q&A – non-video – is also relevant to
psychiatric genomics, but in the broader context of
genome-wide association studies (GWAS) in general. In it,
John Brookfield explains [9] the genetic and evolutionary
principles underlying the current major collaborative
efforts to understand what has become known as the
 genetic architecture of complex diseases, how they can be
bedevilled by the structure of populations, and why they
may be most successful for the diseases of old age.

Brookfield’s Q&A joins earlier Journal of Biology Q&As
tackling concepts critical to topical issues in modern
biology but with which modern biologists are not always
wholly at ease (see [10] for a full listing of Journal of
Biology Q&As).

The very first of our Q&As was from James Ferrell [10],
a lively assault on the confusion of the uninitiated about
systems biology, and featuring the familiar systems
biology hairball (see Figure 1 in [11]) – a representa­
tion of nodes and edges with more iconic than explanatory
power. In this inaugural collection for the fusion journal,
the hairball is revisited (and indeed the same hairball is
reproduced) in an article by Arthur Lander [12], the
author of one of our most accessed items of 2009 (on the
stem cell concept [13]). Ferrell asked “What is systems
biology?” Lander can be said to ask rather “Why is
systems biology?” – a question that he answers with an
eloquent and absorbing disquisition on the absolute
necessity of modelling, at all levels, if we wish to advance
beyond knowledge to understanding.

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