any weakness kicks it out of the winner's circle. For example, one editor submitted a series of three articles about neurologic disorders as one entry. How likely is it that all three articles will be outstanding? Not very. One article was terrific, but it was eliminated from competition because of the other two. Had the stronger article been submitted alone, it would have been elevated to the next stage and perhaps won the competition. In other words, editors should send their strongest entry and let it stand alone.

In what ways, if any, does evaluating entries resemble science editing? How does it differ?
As a science editor, I'm always delighted and surprised when a very good manuscript—one that needs minimal editing—arrives for publication. In contrast, when you judge a competition, you are reading only the best of the best. Someone else has already done the editing, so you have the privilege of sitting back to just read and read and read.

What have you learned from evaluating entries that could help science editors?
When you submit an entry for a competition, read the competition guidelines carefully. If you are sending copies rather than originals, the copies should be as good and clean as possible. Length of the entry can make a difference. Judges often admire short entries (one or two pages), but these rarely stand up well next to a longer entry that is also good. Articles that are very long can be a problem too, unless the quality holds up throughout. Well-executed graphics and sidebars add to an entry. Too many graphics and sidebars distract. Select an entry that is, first and foremost, well written and important to the readership of the publication.

What other insights, if any, would you like to share?
Judging competitions is a great way for editors to identify trends, pick up new ideas, and spend stimulating hours with colleagues. The broad cross-section of entries submitted to any one competition is a chance to learn what's happening in other fields. Topics of entries can range from missile shields to tofu recipes to investment strategies to colon cancer. Expect to be stimulated and inspired!

Letter

Thanks for letting me know how others are handling the care of elderly relatives.1 Supporting my mother and my mother-in-law for the last 7 or so years has been a major stress for my husband and me.

The details of that experience would not add to what you wrote in Science Editor, but I want to contribute two practical tips:
1. After my mother-in-law moved to the nursing home this year, my husband and I signed up for our telephone company’s voice mail service ($6.50 per month). We already had an answering machine, but this is of no use when we are tying up the phone line with the Internet. Now we know that we won’t miss any calls.
2. In 1994, we helped my mother-in-law obtain a reverse mortgage, which not only provided money for nonroutine expenses but also decreased my mother-in-law’s worries considerably. When her house was sold this year, the loan was repaid. Given the costs of the reverse mortgage (initial fees, interest, and service charges), there wasn’t much left over, but the reverse mortgage had done its job and had allowed my mother-in-law to remain in her home comfortably for many years. The AARP Web site has information on reverse mortgages.2 Obtaining one took a fair amount of legwork by my husband and me, but it worked well.

References