

editorial

Something we can feel proud of

Physicists have a right to feel proud of the results of the sociological study reported on page 28 of this issue. Harriet Zuckerman and Robert Merton, two eminent sociologists of science, have conducted a thorough assessment of the refereeing system that serves *Physical Review*. They report that the system is doing an excellent job.

The 4000 physicists who serve as referees for The American Physical Society's primary reference journal, in effect, determine what is contained in the recorded knowledge of our science. The degree of dedication, imagination and integrity that these volunteers are able to bring to their task is bound to be reflected in the state of health of physics as a science.

It is good news to hear Zuckerman and Merton conclude that in general the combined effort of the referees appears to accomplish exactly what it is supposed to do—"Sift out the good papers from the bad." Some detailed findings of the two authors are worthy of comment. The records show that the young, unknown physicist has about as good a chance to get his paper published as the older, eminent physicist and a much better chance than the older, lesser-known physicist. This should be gratifying to those who are concerned that physics research has become dominated by an Establishment hierarchy. Actually most physicists are probably already aware that the odds of anyone's paper being accepted in *Physical Review* are reasonably good—about 8 out of 10. But it may not be generally realized and again it is gratifying to learn that proportionately more refereeing effort is spent on the 20% of the papers ultimately rejected than on those accepted. (The details of procedure for these cases have been

explained by APS Editor-in-Chief S. A. Goudsmit in *physics today*, April 1970, page 10.)

No evidence was uncovered by Zuckerman and Merton that would support the classic complaint about referees that they suppress the expansion of new knowledge by being loathe to publish contributions that are off the beaten track. The real problem today, it would seem, is not that referees are screening out important new information but rather how we can make it possible for physicists to become aware of this information once it has been published.

Harold L. Davis