

The Challenge of the Peer Review Process

The veracity of the content of any medical publication relies on the peer review process, a most important tool to ascertain the quality of the science being published. There is a need to evaluate the rigor of methodology, ascertain the authenticity of the data collected, and to assist authors in sharpening the analysis of their work.¹ Thus, essential to any journal is the ability to attract a community of such scholars to perform reviews.

On the surface, it seems to be an easy task. To be invited to review a scientific article in any journal is flattering. To receive an invitation from top tier publications is prestigious. Yet, there seems to be some difficulty in recruiting and managing the performance of this supposedly highly motivated group.² Apparently, the actual concern is not merely in engaging an adequate number of scholars to agree to review. Since most peer reviewers are authors themselves who are encouraged to provide evaluation to their colleagues, many conditions including the explosion of publications, the requirements of academia to publish, and the incentivization of performing reviews for promotion, all contribute to swell the ranks of the willing.³ What challenge many an editor nowadays are tasks that require creativity mixed with pragmatism: discerning the competency and objectivity of reviewers, improving the effectiveness of the review, and increasing the efficiency of the review process.⁴ Strengthening the editorial board with renowned experts aid in the identification of experienced reviewers and the development of a large enough pool. These measures affect the quality of reviews obtained, limit bias, and improve efficiency of the process. Being a university-based health journal, we can rely on our large community of scholars to supply these needs. Yet, we must look beyond our walls to expand the expertise and to improve objectivity of the reviews since many a field in the health sciences have expanded by leaps and bounds outside of the capacity of our own group.

Another issue is to address the quality of the reviews.⁵ It takes time to come up with a good review. An overburdened academic may find it increasingly difficult to meet the deadlines and thus result in delay in submission. This has a profound impact on the journal's metric to process each submission promptly and will eventually limit its ability to attract authors. Additionally, methods to contain bias such as double-blind reviewing may impair the ability to cross check the capacity of investigators to undertake specific studies. Indeed, with the proliferation of AI-assisted writing, the identity and reputation of researchers matter. It is a balancing act to be objective and reduce bias while trying to identify any dishonest behavior.

Lastly, the peer review is an academic mentoring process. Many authors find the comments and suggestions helpful. It is the obligation of the peer reviewer to provide constructive feedback not only to improve the writing but to allow data collected to see the light of day, properly presented and competently analyzed. There is also the matter of employing AI tools in improving such output, but the technology is nascent, the appropriateness of the application and the ethical debates surrounding it are enormous and require another discussion on its own.

It is, therefore, the responsibility of us editors to uphold the integrity and quality of the peer review process. We should continually recruit and maintain a competent pool of experts who are able to apply rigorous scrutiny to submissions, provide constructive feedback to the authors, and conduct these tasks within a reasonable time frame. Through these, we can foster trust and cooperation in our community, and allow innovative and inclusive science to flourish under our watch. This we commit to do in the coming years.

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