Editorial

A Case for Refereed Journals

As an editor, I am often asked the question, "What is a refereed journal?" The question is posed by young investigators or junior faculty who are feeling pressures to publish in order to achieve academic promotion. Sometimes the question is asked honestly to seek information, but it also may be a rhetorical question.

The straightforward answer is that a refereed journal is one in which the editors seek the advice of two or more manuscript reviewers external to the editorial staff. Typically, in refereed journals, the manuscripts received are all assigned by the editor to two or more reviewers who are known to be familiar with the current literature on the topic addressed by the authors. The reviewers are asked to examine the content of the manuscript for accuracy, its potential contribution to the literature, adequacy of evidence, methods of analysis, interest to readers, and writing style. For the *Journal of the American Board of Family Practice*, reviewers may be family physicians, other specialist physicians, nonphysician health professionals, biostatisticians, or some combination thereof. Usually, at least one family physician serves as a reviewer for such papers.

The comments of the reviewers are studied by the editorial staff. The editor then decides the disposition of the manuscript. It may be accepted for publication, returned to the author for revision and resubmission, or it may be rejected. Sometimes, the content appears initially to be unsuitable for publication in that specific journal. Under these circumstances, the paper may be rejected without review in order to save time and expense.

An underlying rhetorical question might be, "Why a refereed journal?" The answer to this question is a bit more complex. It must be recognized that editors are not omniscient. Without a referee system, the editors would be required to publish all manuscripts or express their own personal biases and prejudices in the selection of manuscripts to publish. Both alternatives have serious negative implications to the scientific community.

There are some who argue that all manuscripts should be published if they are readable. The onus is then placed on the author and the reader to determine the quality of the manuscript. In some very narrow fields of study, this system might be acceptable. Medical scientists have generally rejected this plan because if the reader/practitioner is badly misled, patients could suffer.

There are others who argue that the referee system limits the publication of potentially important papers when the referees are strongly biased or prejudiced. Also, some complain that the referee system delays, impedes, or otherwise compromises the distribution of potentially valuable new information. Delays in publication and requests for revisions are certainly aggravating to the beleaguered author. However, most manuscripts are improved to some degree by the referee process. Not infrequently, basic flaws are uncovered and the manuscripts are improved by the review process.

Most refereed medical journals use an anonymous system. The referees are blinded to the author's identity, and the authors are blinded to the referee's identity. At times, the content of the manuscript or the nature of the referee's criticisms reveal their identities, but this is unusual in our specialty. Some would argue that referees may use anonymity to express personal biases or even unethical behavior. Most editors would agree that this is not the case. Furthermore, editors need objectivity from a referee. Personal knowledge of the authors could cloud the opinions of the referee. In addition, it must be remembered that the editor, not the referee, decides what is to be published.

Occasionally, there are legitimate controversies identified by the referee system. When this occurs, the editor should try to present the reader with both sides of the controversy in an unbiased fashion. Thus, the true state of the art is made evident, and the reader can be better informed.

On the whole, it appears that, although imperfect and at times frustrating, the referee system of editing a scientific journal is better than other available alternatives. It is our sincere hope that our referee system provides a valuable service to authors and readers alike.

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