

Ethics of Peer Review: A guide for manuscript reviewers and issues in Pakistan

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Introduction

The peer review of a manuscript is a cornerstone of modern science and medicine. To maintain the standard of a journal, it is usually the collective effort of the investigators doing research and the peers who critically evaluate the manuscript. Peer reviewed journals mostly rely on expert and objective review by the knowledgeable researchers to ensure the quality of papers they publish.

The reviewer's while reviewing a manuscript should give opinions on matters like: Are the techniques current, valid and appropriate? Is the data rightly analyzed and presented and if not then how data should be handled? How rigorous or speculative authors are in interpreting the data.

To understand the roles and responsibilities of the peers/ reviewers it is important that one should know the peer review process. The first group of people who get in touch with the manuscript is the Journal staff. They receive the manuscript and send the receipt of manuscript, manage communications with authors and reviewers. This staff also processes the accepted manuscripts for publication. The second groups of people who get in touch with the manuscript are scientific editors. These are scientists who make the final decision of whether to accept the manuscript or return it for revision, or reject it straight away.

Members of the editorial board are again scientists who read and review papers to select appropriate reviewers, monitor quality of reviews,

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and recommend actions to editor. Reviewers/peers provide review of the manuscript and make recommendations concerning publication.

Quality of Peers

The editors are looking for very specific qualities in the reviewers or peers. These qualities include that the peer should have expertise on the subject, have clear objectivity and there should be no conflicts of interest. The peer should have clear and good capacity to make correct judgment, should be able to think clearly and logically, be able to write a good critique, be accurate, readable and helpful to editors and authors. The peer should be reliable in reviewing the manuscript within the allotted time frame and should be quick in returning reviews.

Although reviewers are generally blinded while reviewing the manuscripts to provide critical and honest reviews and often the reviewer's identity is not released to authors or third parties but sometimes despite all these concealments and blinding the reviewers know the authors and vice versa.

While reviewing a manuscript the peer should see if the work done in the research is similar or very close to his/her own work. For example does the paper contain experiments that overlap with those you are performing, planning, or preparing for publication; if yes then decline to review the manuscript to avoid the charges of conflict of interest and misconduct. Also make every effort to avoid receiving the full paper, as this would further lead you to misconduct and charges on ethics. If by any chance you receive the full paper then return it immediately and discuss this problem with editor. As a peer if there is conflict of interest or you do not have to review then you cannot pass the paper to someone else to review on your own. Always discuss with the editor and permission from the editor before doing so.

As a peer if you receive an article then check if you have the time to review the article within the time frame requested by the editor. As a peer one knows that reviewing manuscripts takes time, which varies from few weeks to a minimum of 1-2 hours on a typical manuscript review. The time frame to do the review is often short and reviewing is usually unrewarding. Most studies have shown that researchers perform much better reviews than academicians because researchers are well-versed updated scientists who have time to review. Despite all commitments occasionally

even the most conscientious scientist will at times be unable to take on this additional task of peer reviewing, in such cases the reviewer should decline to review.

Role and responsibilities of Peers

As a peer one should also know their roles and responsibilities. The peers should know that the manuscripts they are reviewing are confidential documents which contain unpublished data and ideas, therefore they must be kept confidential. At this stage of handling the unpublished data the peer should not share the paper or its contents even with your colleagues. Once manuscripts are received they should be kept in a secure place, where they are not readily accessible to the curious or unscrupulous people.

While reviewing a manuscript always remember that as a peer you cannot use the information in the paper in your own research or cite it in your own publication. While reviewing always remember that the journal needs your scientific expertise, not your editorial assistance. Look into the quality, importance, and novelty of the science presented in the manuscript. Reviewers who focus on minor editorial problems (typographical errors, misspellings) and do not comment on the scientific content of the paper are useless reviewers.

While reviewing focus on the science, the appropriateness of the techniques, the strengths and weaknesses of the experimental design, the quality of the data and analyses, and the appropriateness and impact of the conclusions drawn by the authors. The comments made in the review should present clearly the reviewer's analysis of the quality, novelty, and importance of the science and the effectiveness and appropriateness of its presentation in the manuscript.

The peer should also look for any evidence if much or all of the paper has been published previously by the same authors or the text or ideas have been copied without permission or appropriate attribution to the workers or there are concerns about the integrity of the data, analyses, and conclusions or the data looks fabricated or falsified or the data appears manipulated or analyzed inappropriately causing the conclusions to be deliberately misleading. Under such circumstances the reviewer should carefully examine copies of the original documents to confirm his/her initial impression and should take the editor in confidence and discuss the problem and provide the editor with copies of the relevant documents. The editor not the reviewer has the right to initiate appropriate action against

the author for plagiarism and duplicate publications following established guidelines and procedures.

While writing critiques always remember to use a style and tone in which you would like to receive comments. Make sure that comments are clear, concise, and accurate. The primary purpose of review is to advise the author in guiding revision of the paper for the same or a different journal and in suggesting ways to improve the project. The comments may be very brief, especially in the case of an excellent, well prepared paper but at times they may be extensive if the reviewer feels the paper has valuable elements but requires extensive revisions to present the findings effectively. The reviewer should know that the comments would be sent to the author therefore always try to use a constructive, informative and collegial tone. Comments and recommendations should be clear and supported with citations to specific areas in the text. The editor should tone down the comments of the reviewers who use rude and non collegial language..

Once the review has been done send comments to the journal but keep a copy of the review until you are certain that it has been received by the journal and there are no questions. Once the editor or the journal staff confirms that reviews have been received, then after that all working notes on the manuscript should be destroyed in a way that ensures confidentiality.

Problems of Peers in Pakistan

In Pakistan there are very few experts in different fields of medicine and science and it has been observed that often competent clinicians are not good reviewers and many good reviewers are not good clinicians or academicians. Very few know how to review article therefore to pick good reviewers one has to adopt a hit and try method. Many reviewers know that there are deficiencies in the paper but do not know how to compose and pen them. Some reviewers even inform the authors or colleagues once they receive the paper and try to show the author or the colleagues their power.

Despite an obvious conflict of interest they accept an article to review and occasionally they reject a study with or without giving valid reasons but will themselves do a similar study later. These peers even accept papers under pressure or obligation especially if they are from their seniors or from people they know, despite their preoccupations and time limitations the peers disregard the time limit and take a long time to review. Often the

peers give an excuse of loosing the manuscript when reminders are sent to them to send their comments. Once they send their comments they do not keep a record of their previous comments for 2nd review. Despite all these deficiencies and shortfalls the peers are indispensable and required by each peer reviewed journal.

The way forward: to overcome the deficiency of peer/ reviewers in Pakistan we should have training of trainers, share good reviews with other reviewers, use younger generation as second reviewers, emphasize to them that they should give comments in a way as to how to get this manuscript accepted. Acknowledge reviewers on and off by sending letters of support and including them in the editorial board.

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