

# Chapter-35

## How to overcome your inhibitions to be a Peer Reviewer

Shaukat Ali Jawaid

### ***What is Peer Review?***

It is a central activity in increasing quality of manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals for publication. However, it is poorly understood process which remains under intense scrutiny and controversy. Some people feel that it creates un-necessary hurdles in publication of research and delays the publication process. However, till such time that we have some alternative available to judge and evaluate the quality of manuscripts, peer review will stand and will continuously be used by the Editors of biomedical journals.

### ***Who is a Peer Reviewer?***

Peer Reviewer is a person who assesses the merits of a manuscript submitted for republication in a journal.

Peer Review plays an important role in improving the quality, the value and even reputation of science. It is not essential that only experts, the medical heavyweights, senior faculty members can alone become Reviewers but it has often been found that young faculty members, those who have attended courses in research methodology, epidemiology and are affiliated with the teaching institutions are best reviewers and do a much better job as compared to the seniors. One must remember that experience could be a good teacher but desire and attitude which are not age dependent can make up for the experience.<sup>1</sup>

The editors prefer those who do timely and helpful review which helps the authors to improve their manuscripts and also helps the Editor to make a decision about the manuscript whether to accept it, reject or send it back to the author for revision and resubmission. It is essential that when one is invited to review a manuscript, respond immediately, confirm your willingness to review or if you are busy and cannot do the job in the desired time, either ask the editor to give you more time or request him to send it to some other reviewer. One of the most common complaint by the authors against editors is that they do not get any response for months together after submission of their manuscripts. The peer reviewers are supposed to provide comments and suggestions but not criticism. A critical review of the manuscript should enable the reviewer to find out strength and weakness of the study. It is quite possible that some manuscripts may require to be reviewed by more than one or two reviewers who have expertise in different areas. For example an ophthalmologist might require the help and assistance of a Retina surgeon in case of a study in diabetic retinopathy. Similarly in every major specialty, now number of sub-specialties have emerged i.e. Child Psychiatry, Paediatric Dermatology, Endocrinology etc. Hence a study on a topic which falls under the sub-specialty might require review by more than one or two experts.

One of the reviewers in the manuscript can look at the basic sciences aspects while the other can review methodology while services of a statistician may be required to look at the statistics part of the manuscript, analysis and interpretation of the data. Whenever you receive a manuscript from a journal, in case you think it is beyond your area of expertise, do not hesitate to communicate to the Editor, tell the editor Truth immediately so that they can send it to some other reviewer. This will also save some precious time as the authors are always very impatient to hear about the outcome of review, waiting for the good news of acceptance of their manuscripts for publication.

Remember the Reviewers are the Advisors and not the Decision makers. They advice the editors who are the final

authority to accept or reject the manuscript.<sup>2</sup> As such do not recommend a rejection. The Editors usually send each manuscript to more than one reviewers and the other reviewer might find merit in accepting it for publication. Quite a few manuscripts are accepted for publication after revision when the authors have incorporated the comments and suggestions by the Reviewers while submitting the revised manuscript. Recommendation by the reviewers is just one component which helps an Editor whether the manuscript is good enough and can be accepted for publication. During final editing sometimes the Editor or Copy Editors do find some mistakes in references which may not tally with the references list at the end of the manuscript. It has often been observed that those who use Endnote at times while revising the manuscript do make some mistakes as regards placement of references, hence it is always advisable for the authors to re-check the references while the Reviewers should also at least check the references at random if they are not checking all the references. Or you can ask the editor that references needs to be re-checked.

While looking at the revised manuscript, try to find out whether the authors have utilized this opportunity to improve the manuscript responding to the reviewer's comments and suggestions. Some journal editors besides providing a check list for Reviewer, also expect the authors to make the desired changes in the formatted manuscript sent to them, highlight the changes made besides providing a separate response letter how they have responded to the various comments and suggestions point by point. This helps in quick second review which most often is done by the Editors themselves and if they are satisfied, the manuscript may be accepted. It is only in a few cases when the manuscript needs complete extensive revision and rewriting that the editors will send it back to the reviewers again who had earlier reviewed this manuscript for their final evaluation.

Reviewing a paper also provides an opportunity to the reviewer of learning new things, new developments in that particular area though some seniors feel that they rarely learn

anything. Being a Reviewer is very helpful. It provides you an opportunity to remain abreast with the latest developments. Sometimes the editors send the reviews received from one reviewer to the other which is yet another good opportunity to learn. Above all while reviewing the manuscripts, one also becomes a better writer by looking at write-up by other authors. How tables are made, how figures are constructed and how do the authors discuss the strength and limitations of their studies.<sup>1</sup>

It will also help you understand how to respond to reviewer's comments and suggestions. It is quite likely that sometimes the authors may not agree with the comments by the reviewer and may provide references to strengthen their arguments supporting their view point. This should not be taken as a criticism but one should try to learn from this. Reviewing a manuscript also provides you an insight how the authors and the editors think. The reviewers can make a positive contribution in the selection, promotion or tenure of an author while evaluating his research work submitted for publication. Some good reviewers stand a good chance of being elevated to be the member of the Editorial Board. We in Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences have elevated a number of good reviewers appointing them Members of the Editorial Board while some were included among the International Advisors. Despite peer review, it is quite likely that some flaws and deficiencies remain in the published manuscript which could have been improved.

While doing the final editing of the manuscripts which are recommended for publication after peer review, we look at them critically and sometimes do find out some mistakes which were not picked up earlier during initial internal review as well as external review. At times certain things are overlooked by the Reviewers. A manuscript recommended for publication by the Reviewers may be rejected and the one Rejected by the Reviewers may be accepted after revision by the Editor as they are the final judge and are responsible for the contents of the journal since safeguarding the integrity and credibility of the Journal lies with them.

## REFERENCES

1. Annesley TM. Seven Reasons Not to Be a Peer Reviewer—And Why These Reasons Are Wrong *Clinical Chemistry* 2012;58(4):677-679. DOI: 10.1373/clinchem.2012.182618.
2. Rohrich R. Editor is just like Capitan of the Ship who should learn how to manage the challenges. Workshop for Editors during WAME Conference held at New Delhi India from October 1-4, 2015. *Pulse International* November 1, 2015. <http://www.pulsepakistan.com/index.php/main-news-nov-1-15/1373-editor-is-just-like-capitan-of-the-ship-who-should-learn-how-to-manage-the-challenges-dr-rod-rohrich> Accessed on July 19, 2017.

## FURTHER READINGS

1. *Peer Review in Health Sciences* Edited by Fiona Godlee and Tom Jefferson. BMJ Books, BMJ Publishing Group. London. 1999.

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1. Shaukat Ali Jawaid  
Chief Editor,  
Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences,  
Karachi-Pakistan.  
E-mail: [pjms@pjms.com.pk](mailto:pjms@pjms.com.pk),  
[pulse@pulsepakistan.com](mailto:pulse@pulsepakistan.com)