

## Peer Review Revisited – A Note About Publication-shopping Scientists

Dear Readers,

Being an active reviewer for multiple journals has given me completely new insights into the review process. Eight months ago, I received a manuscript from the editor of a well-respected journal. The manuscript was revised by two reviewers and the decision was rejection due to many flaws in the study. During the last 6 months, the manuscript ended up in my mailbox 3 more times, gradually improving. Due to insufficiently corrected flaws, the decision was unfortunately again unanimously the same. Today it is lying on my table for the 4th time, of course from the 4th journal. This is the reason why I decided to write this note.

Comparing it to the first version, I can hardly recognize that it is the same paper; but without doubt, the essence of the study and the data reveal that it is the same study that landed in my mailbox 8 months ago. Since the manuscript is so well-polished and dramatically improved, and even though it is now difficult not to be biased, I will not reject it. I do not know what the other reviewer will decide. It should, of course, be the goal of a review process to give feedback and make constructive criticism. However, I recognize some of my and the other reviewers' suggestions copied and pasted partially if not completely as new paragraphs into the Discussion. The manuscript evolved in the newer versions. Now I ask myself, who really is the owner of the intellectual property? Certainly we all learned from the review process, and the anonymous reviewers were perhaps at times the best supervisors. However, since I've begun to encounter this trend more frequently, I can come to the conclusion that there is a certain method behind it. When I shared my thoughts and doubts on this issue with some other colleagues, I usually received two answers, either "What's wrong with that?" or that this is called "publication shopping" among some scientists: Namely, you write a quick paper and send it to a top journal. Then you wait and see what the reviewers' comments will be, and, based on the critique, you improve your work in order to send it to the next better journal, of course challenging the reviewers again and again (perhaps sometimes forgetting that the paper may meet the same reviewers again). Who dares to submit, gets credit sooner or later, in one way or another.

This observation raises more issues. I think that a few authors functioning that way are triggering changes within the community of reviewers, who are beginning to offer criticism alone, rather than open suggestions for improvement. Furthermore, I think that we as a scientific community should think about the ethical aspects of such a procedure.

So what might be the way out? Is this kind of behavior a consequence of naivety, lack of good supervision, laziness,

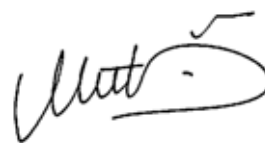
or opportunism? I had many thoughts, but none were really conclusive. Perhaps editors should transmit only the real criticism of the reviewers without giving details. In that case, we would be missing the true point of the peer review process. Or should editors request with the submission a statement about the "history" of a manuscript? But then again, what should we do with this information? In any case, it would be impossible to verify. Or maybe we should adopt the following as a rule: Next to general rating/criticism and suggestions for improvements, the reviewers should be asked to formulate questions to the authors, with the requirement that the authors answer them. Both questions and answers would be published at the end of the paper, including the names of the reviewers. Yes, this would mean even more work for the reviewer and slightly greater paper consumption, but on the other hand, it would be obvious who reviewed the manuscript and perhaps force the authors to put more diligent effort and thought into their paper before submitting it.

All these solutions may be nonsense. But I do know that this kind of "shopping behavior" could have taken place in the initial phase or while setting up the study. The scientist could also have consulted the experts for advice or knowledge when analyzing the data. Their contribution should be in some way acknowledged in the paper.

Dear Peers, if you have similar experiences, please let me know what you think about this problem and possible solutions, or how to handle the situation. With the inflation in the number of journals, authors, scientists, data, books, and publishers, but the constant handful of committed reviewers and the unchangeable 24-hour day that everyone has, the review process is becoming difficult.

Perhaps I should not make such a fuss about it. The bottom line is that the data and information are for the improvement of the profession, the health of the patients, and the benefit of the scientific dental community. Hopefully, the "shopping authors" will one day no longer need to shop around, but will instead produce original papers themselves, if they have learned enough from the review processes they went through.

Sincerely yours,



Prof. Dr.med.dent. Mutlu Özcan  
E-mail: mutluozcan@hotmail.com