

## Peer review—it should mean something

Whatever one may think of the process, peer review means something. True, the system can be a biased and sometimes unfairly critical system. And, despite the counterchecks of multiple reviewers, peer review cannot always prevent publication of poor science or inappropriate anecdote. But generally the peer-review process for a dental journal, such as *QI*, results in the reinforcement of a definitive standard for publication—a standard for both the science and the writing that is necessary to assure the reader that what is published between the covers is not just one person's biased interpretation of an unwarranted assumption. One very positive aspect of peer review is that it forces authors to listen to outsiders' comments and suggestions (sometimes harshly critical comments), which generally results in an improved end product.

Like a film-rating system, or the miles/gallon or km/liter rating of an automobile, the fact that a journal puts articles through peer review places the journal in a defined category. It is a journal of higher value—more scientific, more prestigious, if you like. A peer-reviewed journal means that published papers have a higher value to the author when used for evaluation purposes, such as in university hiring, promotion, and tenure processes. It is a means of putting some measure of quality and scientific accuracy to a publication.

So it is nothing short of cheating to claim that the articles published in a journal are peer reviewed when in fact they are not. Recently I saw a reprint of an article that can only be described as a written infomercial on the desk of a university faculty member. (For international readers, an infomercial is generally a commercial advertisement disguised as an information source.) The article had been delivered to the university by a sales representative of the company whose product was featured in the article. Two university faculty members from one of the top dental schools in the United States had written the article. Boldly displayed under the title of the journal on the cover page of the reprint was the subtitle, "A peer-reviewed journal on the clinical aspects of dentistry." One of the authors of the article is listed as a member of the Editorial Board of the journal.

Colleagues who allow their names to appear on an "Editorial Board" of a so-called "peer-reviewed journal"

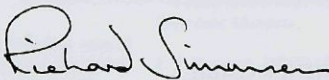
knowing that the journal is not peer reviewed—at least according to the commonly accepted academic standard for the term—should stop and think whether they wish to support an unethical claim with their name attached. I am sure that many, if not most, of those on the list in question probably have not done this.

The journal in question frequently features articles that are, by their content, advertisements, and they cannot have undergone even a thinly disguised "peer review" process. There is, of course, a reason for this. The articles in question would never pass such a peer-review system. And it means that articles can be contracted, (yes, the authors in question were paid to write their infomercial), perhaps even sponsored directly or indirectly by a manufacturer, and published, with a guaranteed income to the journal from purchased reprints—reprints purchased by the manufacturer. A wicked circle of back-scratching if ever I saw one.

I have nothing against an infomercial in a dental publication, provided it is properly identified as such. I have nothing against a manufacturer contracting for an article, getting it published, and distributing reprints to universities and dental colleagues, provided the article is identified as coming from a manufacturer. I have nothing against the appropriate, and open, blend of commercialism and science. What I object to is a publication's shameless lack of disclosure and outrageous claim to be a part of a category to which it has no right to belong.

Authors, Editorial Board members, and especially publishers are guilty of cheapening the value of the peer-review process if they claim to be publishing peer-reviewed articles in a peer-reviewed journal when it is not.

Please don't forget—peer review means something.



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