

Is the peer review system facing the abyss?

In principle, scientific manuscripts are subjected to a peer review process in high-quality journals prior to possible publication. As a rule, at least two reviews on the scientific quality, content and formal aspects of the manuscript are requested. This is a laudable and established practice that distinguishes high-ranking journals from so-called fake journals or journals that tend to publish junk science.

Nevertheless, alarming developments in this process have been revealed in the last 2 years. In all disciplines, more and more journals are entering the market, and at the same time authors have to publish in increasingly high-ranking publications in the age of performance-based third-party funding. For numerous journals this results in a flood of submitted manuscripts, sometimes with more than 1000 manuscripts per year, which equates to three manuscripts daily! However, the number of qualified and competent reviewers does not increase in proportion to the increasing number of authors desirous to publish.

In my opinion, this disproportionality is based on a questionable problem, which in some cases extends from the Editor-in-Chief to the Associate Editors, to the reviewers. The Editor-in-Chief is showered daily with submitted manuscripts and forwards them to the allegedly responsible Associate Editor. At this stage of the process, there may be noticeable and annoying delays. According to personal experience, this is partly due to the fact that manuscripts are unprocessed with the Associate Editor for up to 2 months before they are finally forwarded to the reviewers. In some cases, this is not surprising and can partly be attributed to the system, since two reviewers must be found who firstly are able to accept the invitation to review the manuscript and secondly can expertly assess the topic of the work. More and more reviewers are permanently 'busy', 'on a journey' or

already have 'one (!) other manuscript for review'. Today, for high-ranking journals, review times are usually expected to be at least 2 to 3 months, which in total results in a length of time of 4 to 6 months from the date of submission to the final decision. This considerable delay becomes all the more annoying when the reviewer's report – as has been experienced in the past – consists of eight lines (which amounts to about one sentence per week of assessment) suggesting rejection of the manuscript, with each sentence appallingly and clearly revealing that the reviewer has not read the manuscript completely; or in some cases, sadly, the manuscript is rejected within 24 hours without an adequate review because the journal may have an unspoken or hidden agenda as to what will and will not be published. These reviews go back to the Associate Editor, who, as the last counterbalance, should assess the quality of the received reviews (although unfortunately this is rarely the case), and then send his or her recommendation to the Editor-in-Chief.

Such increasingly frequent, frustrating experiences, especially for young scientists, in my opinion and that of many of my colleagues, drives talented young scientists into the arms of the fake journals with a less rigorous or frequently missing or lax review process. Disproportionately, this results in manuscripts being published quickly to appease both the publisher and the submitter.

What can be changed in the short term? Those who commit to the rules of the scientific community and the concept of peer reviewing should accept the principle of give and take as a matter of course. If you want to or have to publish a lot, you should also – as a *quid pro quo* – take on tasks in the peer review process, be it as a reviewer or later as an Associate Editor. But this commitment must then be carried out with the same dedication and meticulousness as creating your own manuscripts.

This means a fair, unbiased and tolerant (there are many more than just one, namely your own, point of view) professional evaluation of the manuscript in an acceptable period of time. The pool of available reviewers has to be significantly expanded at short notice, otherwise the concept will become a vicious circle that is difficult to break. I work as a reviewer for more than 50 journals and prepare more than 60 reviews per year (thus, more than one report per week). Certainly, many of my colleagues are as or even more involved. The faster a review is prepared and sent back to the Associate Editor, the sooner – as there are not enough other reviewers available – the same reviewer will receive a new request for the review of another manuscript. The carousel turns faster and faster ...

Furthermore, reviewers and editors (both the Editor-in-Chief and the Associate Editors) must increasingly accept their responsibilities in a timely manner. The acceptance of such a position means one is expected to process manuscripts in an honest and sensitive manner, with absolute impartiality regarding the origin or reputation of the respective authors. The professional assessment of a manuscript by the editor can be a valuable help, especially for young authors. I remember very well my first manuscript for a high-level international journal. At that time, I received a very personal and benevolent response from the Editor-in-Chief, with very valuable considerations on how to further improve the content and form of the manuscript. That was an incentive to me, and was instructive at the same time, and it left a lasting mark on my way of writing manuscripts. Today, almost every review

process ends in a stereotypical copy-and-paste response. Presumably, the automated peer review process does not allow for any other opportunity. This is a great pity, as a tremendous opportunity is lost to guide and teach our young aspiring authors.

Of course, the enormous commitment of editors and reviewers should not go unmentioned. In addition to countless other clinical, scientific and administrative obligations they may have, many already overburdened colleagues regularly provide voluntary work reviewing at a considerably high level, mostly in their free time, and often anonymously and without benefit for their own reputation. The level of appreciation for those efforts is immeasurable! It seems to me at the moment that the established peer review system is at the edge of the abyss and I fear that without any major reorientation of all participants we will soon be one step further ... into that irreversible abyss.

In this sense and on behalf of the editors of ENDO – Endodontic Practice Today I would like to thank all members of the Editorial Board and all our reviewers for their outstanding work during the past years. I very much hope that we can further count on their valuable support in the future.



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