



Behind the Scenes: Publishing in the Maternal and Child Health Journal

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Abstract

The Editors of the Maternal and Child Health Journal offer an inside look at publishing in the journal, including advice for potential authors and reviewers.

Keywords Publication · Reviewer · Author

Significance

Potential authors may benefit from understanding the editorial process at Maternal and Child Health Journal, the journal's goals and vision for the future.

Introduction

In 2017, the Maternal and Child Health Journal (MCHJ) celebrated its 20th anniversary. Since its inception, MCHJ has grown from being a quarterly to a monthly journal, with almost 1000 submissions per year addressing themes of maternal/child health policy, practice, and research. Under the thoughtful stewardship of past Editors-in-Chief Milton Kotelchuk, Greg Alexander and Donna Petersen and current Editor-in-Chief Timothy Dye, the vision of the journal as a “shared space for transdisciplinary science” has continued to flourish (De Ver Dye 2013). While the editorial process has

needed to change to accommodate a growing international readership, the underlying goals of the journal are the same: to publish timely, well-executed, peer-reviewed manuscripts that advance the scientific and professional knowledge in maternal and child health. It has now been 10 years since the last Editor-in-Chief, Donna J. Petersen, addressed the readership in her paper entitled, “Want your paper published faster? Read on...” in 2009, (Petersen 2009) thus, the 20th anniversary milestone seemed appropriate for an updated insider's look into the process of publishing in MCHJ.

Given the daunting task for both the authors and the editors towards editorial efficiency, we aim in this article to clarify the expectations for authors, reviewers, and editors in making the entire editorial process run smoothly. In the spirit of accessible science and transparency of peer-review and publication, the Editorial Board of the journal provides some guidance regarding the editorial process to improve the experience and speed up the process of publication.

Processing Submitted Manuscripts

The process of submitting your completed manuscript online through the Editorial Manager system (<http://www.editorialmanager.com/maci>) has changed little in the last 10 years, a far cry from handwritten manuscripts and invitations to review by telephone detailed by the previous Editor-in-Chief Donna Petersen (Petersen 2013). However, the increase in the number of submissions comes with a much more selective process for acceptance. In spite of an increase in the number of published volumes, we can accommodate less than 20% of the manuscripts received.

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Upon submission of a manuscript, an editorial assistant checks to ensure that your manuscript adheres to the journal specifications and instructions to the author; failure to do so can cause delays in the manuscript being sent to the Editor. Your manuscript should also be carefully edited for language errors; multiple grammatical, spelling, logic and writing errors are a distraction to readers and will decrease your manuscript's chances of surviving the first review and will likely lead to quick rejection (Table 1). Finally, we will search for any red flags for ethics or plagiarism. As part of an initial review, the Editor-in-Chief receives a report on your manuscript when run through plagiarism detection software, as a safeguard against publishing plagiarized, or highly recycled, work. High levels of recycling cross over into plagiarism territory and result in an immediate rejection from the journal. The journal follows the principles of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) in dealing with allegations of research misconduct. Properly cited references, following the Journal's recommended style, are critical to ensuring the integrity of published research.

If your manuscript passes this initial screen, it is then sent to the one of the Editors. At the initial, first tier review of your submission by one of the Editors, we ask four main questions: (1) Is the topic compelling, justified and a fit with the journal's aim? (2) Are the methods sound? (3) Is the writing clear, in agreement with the requirements of scientific writing? (4) Does the topic fill a gap in the literature? Your manuscript should contain results that move the field forward. We are not only interested in novel findings that tell a compelling story but also interesting questions that prompt a well-done study in the first place, even if the results are null. We want to ensure that the science fits with our mission and priority topic areas and will be of interest to our readership. The manuscript is assessed for any major scientific flaws in the methodology, results reporting, and data interpretation.

Given the increasing number of submissions, and the diversity and complexity of the topics, we now have four Section Editors, who receive their editorial assignments from the Editor-in-Chief, and who will shepherd manuscripts through the editorial process in their fields of expertise:

Infant and Child Health, Psychological Health, Pregnancy and Commentary. As most of the weaker manuscripts are weeded out up front before reaching the Section Editors, a high percentage of the manuscripts that make it to this stage do go on for peer review. These manuscripts are appropriately matched to reviewers with expertise in the content that can provide a thorough evaluation of the suitability of that manuscript for publication in the MCHJ. Reviewers, usually consist of scholars in the field who have published on your research topic, including those you recommend and others in our database, as well as members of our Editorial Board.

The Peer Review Process

The journal engages in a double-blind review process and authors submit their manuscripts without any identifying information. The review process is where the bottlenecks to timely decision occur. Dr. Petersen described the challenges of getting the requisite 2–3 adequate reviews to assist her in rendering a first decision for authors (Petersen 2009). The challenge remains unchanged almost 10 years later, and if nothing else, seemingly more insurmountable. The acceptance rate for peer review invitations is at its lowest level over the last 10 years. Beyond that, we want more than just “adequate” reviews. The goal of peer review is to give feedback to the authors that will make the manuscript better, whether it is accepted, revised, or rejected and resubmitted elsewhere (Alexander 2005). To get the requisite number of acceptable reviews to make a fair decision sometimes requires inviting up to 15–20 potential reviewers for each manuscript. At a minimum, while trying to get 3–4 reviews of sufficient quality, we hope to end up with 2 good quality reviews.

As an author, you can assist in this process by suggesting appropriate reviewers, who have experience in the field. It is helpful if you screen out individuals with whom you have known conflicts of interest. When providing their names and contact information, it is highly suggested that you use institutional email addresses that will be reachable on the first try. We tend to not use personal email addresses of individuals, unless they are already known to us as authors or reviewers.

Table 1 Recommendations for authors and reviewers

Tips for authors	Tips for reviewers
Format manuscript according to Instructions for Authors and properly cite references	Decline or accept invitation to review within a day or two
Copyedit manuscript for spelling, grammar and punctuation	If declining an invitation, provide names of colleagues who could perform a peer review on the topic
Decide about open access at the time of submission	Complete your review on time
Carefully choose characteristics and key words for manuscript to aid in proper choice of reviewers	Justify your recommendation in a detailed enough way that the editors will feel confident that the paper has been adequately reviewed
Provide a list of suggested reviewers with their institutional email addresses	Provide feedback for the authors to improve the quality of their manuscript
Submit revisions with a point-by-point response to the critiques	

You can also assist in this process by ensuring that the keywords and classifications listed on your manuscript reflect the content of the work submitted and are descriptive enough to adequately match you with peer reviewers who have the specific expertise to review your manuscript. Oftentimes, we see classifications chosen by authors are too general to be helpful in finding adequate reviewers. For example, choosing “Child Health” for a manuscript is likely too broad to find a reviewer who has the knowledge to understand the importance of your work. It will also delay finding appropriate reviewers, leading to longer wait times until a decision is rendered.

We hope that our reviewers will contribute to the journal by doing a certain number of quality reviews per year. Strong peer review is one of the pillars of our journal, and we take pride in the time and effort that our reviewers spend to do a thoughtful review. A review that is not thorough does us no favors as we may have to deem it unusable and then wait for an additional reviewer to respond. We have an Editorial Board of strong reviewers, who have agreed to do a certain number of full peer reviews per year. As a reviewer, when you do receive an invitation to review, you can assist the process by letting us know your decision to accept or decline the invitation as soon as possible, i.e. within a day or two. The invitation left hanging without a response is a further delay in time to a first decision. In the event that a reviewer is not available, declining the invitation quickly assists in the process of finding quality reviewers to continue. When you decline an invitation to review, providing the names of several colleagues who could also do a peer review on the topic also helps in the arduous process of finding a sufficient number of peer reviewers. This will help speed up the process while lowering the frustration of authors associated with delays.

Once we have a number of reviewers that have accepted the invitation to review, we hope that they will complete their reviews in a timely fashion and that the reviews will be complete and of sufficient quality to make a first decision for the authors. In recent years, the completion rate of those reviewers who accepted the invitation is 30%. Coupled with the low acceptance rate of peer reviews in the first place, peer review overall is where major delays in first decision can occur. Or, when a review is received, we are sad to see that it consists of a few sentences with a recommendation. While we are appreciative of a recommendation for next steps, these types of reviews do not fulfill the goal of peer review, which is to give thoughtful and evenhanded critique and provide the authors feedback on how to improve their manuscript, for eventual publication in the MCHJ or elsewhere. As editors, it is necessary to have more than a couple of sentences that justify the reviewer’s recommendation. In fact, we recommend starting your peer review with your recommendation, followed by remarks which justify that

decision. Finally, your recommendation about the priority for publication (high, average, low) is a useful gauge to the editors for how compelling you think the work is

We routinely give reviewers 2–3 weeks to submit their recommendations. Oftentimes, reviewers do not submit their promised reviews on time, despite gentle reminders from the editors. Some reviewers respond to these gentle reminders and immediately submit their review, while others do not respond at all. It is not uncommon to have reviewers far exceeding that deadline. If that is the case, it causes further delays to a first decision. We can use a “wait and see” approach to determine if they will eventually submit the review, after several reminders, or scramble to find other peer reviewers and give them sufficient time to complete their reviews (while again hoping that they will submit their review on time). As editors, we tend to give everyone that agreed to review the opportunity to complete their reviews by the deadline, and maybe a day or two after. As a reviewer, if you cannot make the deadline in a timely fashion, do not be surprised if the editors make a decision without your input.

To increase the pool of reviewers, we encourage experienced peer reviewers to mentor trainees and junior faculty in the etiquette and steps of performing proper peer review. We invite mentors to recommend their trainees as reviewers, with the first several reviews done under their supervision. This allows us to build our database with a pool of enthusiastic, willing, and able peer reviewers.

Peer review is essential for good quality, rigorous science. The journal supports that process by partnering with Publons so that academic credit can be given for both efforts in editorship and review. Once you create a free account, you can establish a validated track record of peer review efforts that can be used as evidence in individual evaluations, for promotion, or continuing education.

On average, MCHJ averages 4–6 months for the time to first decision, although there are outliers where it has taken upwards of 1 year to get enough sufficient reviews to render a decision. We are continuing to improve in our process to return a first decision in an even shorter timeframe. We often get (sometimes angry) emails asking where the manuscript is in the queue. At times, the online editorial manager may falsely suggest that the manuscript is in a certain place in the queue, when that may not actually be the case. For example, sometimes “Reviews complete” is listed as a status when two completed reviews are received, but the system cannot determine whether these reviews are acceptable enough to render a decision. We understand that peer reviewers are busy people and need time to submit a thoughtful critique. While we appreciate your email inquiring on the fate of your manuscript, we are rarely able to speed up the process. The manuscripts are processed in the order in which they were received to remove any favoritism or bias from the editorial

process and as we have shown above, the peer-review is a time intensive process.

Revision and Acceptance

If the initial decision on your manuscript is “Major” or “Minor” revisions, you will have some time to submit a revision. A thoughtfully produced revision that responds to the reviewers’ critiques in a point-by-point fashion greatly helps the editors follow where changes have been made. You can also opt to disagree with the reviewers’ recommendations, providing a reason why you do not. It is also important to submit a manuscript that is free of any spelling, grammar, or other typos because at this stage, the editor can choose to “Accept as is.” While the time to decision can be long (even as we continually strive to streamline the process), once accepted, it takes about 2 weeks before the manuscript is published online.

Another consideration to increase the impact of a published work is to request open access, for a supplemental fee. Current fees for open access are available on the Maternal Child and Health Journal website. A prospective author must request this up front when the manuscript is originally submitted. One benefit of open access publication is that it dramatically increases the use of the paper; in fact, our most cited papers are often published with open access.

A Global Journal

MCHJ is truly a journal with an international impact. We are aiming to publish rigorous science from around the world and of global interest for maternal and child health. While most of our visits are still from readers in North America, almost 20% of our visitors are from Asia, and another 15% from Europe. We have an increasing number of global health submissions to the journal in addition to authors from global locales. We encourage the authors to provide a convincing

rationale in their manuscript for what the work contributes and how the findings relate from a particular geographic region to the wider audience and readership of MCHJ, in order to have a more global impact.

We also welcome motivated and energetic individuals with a passion for a certain topic within maternal and child health to consider submitting a proposal for a special issue or supplement. When the journal issues a call for submissions to a special issue, we are seeking high quality manuscripts on a chosen theme in maternal and child health; these manuscripts will be peer reviewed with the same rigor as described above. The other option is a supplement, which is a sponsored issue of manuscripts curated and peer reviewed on a specific topic; while still rigorously peer reviewed, there is more leniency in article length and adherence to author guidelines.

In summary, we are excited about the next era of growth for Maternal and Child Health Journal. In our continued stewardship of a journal that represents the latest cutting-edge science in maternal and child health in North America and around the globe, we welcome your ongoing passion and partnership reflected in our pages.

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