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Editorial

The peer review process: Giving and receiving advice



The peer review process is an integral feature of journal publication. Reviewers knowledgeable in the field are invited to provide the journal editors with expert advice about the scientific and intellectual quality of a manuscript, the clinical relevance and potential impact of the work to musculoskeletal science and clinical practice (in the case of this journal) and assist the editors to select work worthy of publication. However the system is not without its challenges.

Another major function of the review process is to help improve the quality of manuscripts that are published. Towards this end, reviewers supply authors with feedback and comment on where manuscripts can be improved. Most authors put their best efforts into their research and the preparation of the manuscripts prior to publication. Thus from an author's perspective it can be disheartening to receive a recommendation of major revision or rejection of their work. However, authors be heartened. A 'hole in one' (i.e. accepted for publication on the first submission without revision) is a rare event for even highly experienced researchers submitting their work to international peer reviewed quality journals. Fresh eyes often see flaws in design, conduct of research or in manuscript presentation that authors, so close to the work, are unable to see.

Reviewers have ethical and professional responsibilities in the review process. They should/do not accept manuscripts for review where there is a potential for a conflict of interest. Journal editors expect the review to be constructive and helpful to authors in revising the manuscript or indeed their study. It should provide the opportunity for scientific discussion/exchange between editors/reviewers and authors. However, it is not uncommon to hear concerns from authors for example, that the reviewer was biased against the work or their research group or were protecting their own work. Let it be said, that the majority of reviewers do an expert, helpful and unbiased evaluation of papers they review. Yet the double blinded peer review process used in many journals, does in many ways protect the reviewer from accounting directly to the authors for their appraisal and comments. This anonymity should never be abused and reviewers should always

communicate honestly, respectfully and accountably to avoid any adverse perceptions. It does however, open the debate of whether the review process should be an open process where both authors and reviewers are identified through or at the end of the process. Many journals are already successfully using this process. Transparency has its merits and perhaps some challenges.

Authors should regard reviewers' comments constructively, consider carefully them and respond to each one. Amendments to the manuscript are often required to each point. This should be done in an equally positive manner. If authors feel that the reviewer 'just doesn't get it', then it suggests that the authors have not explained the point in the text or put their argument well. Likewise it is insufficient to answer a reviewer's question but not amend the text. If it has not been clear to a reviewer and it has warranted an explanation, then the reader would also likely benefit from the explanation. However reviewers are not infallible. If you have a strong basis to disagree with a reviewer's point or criticism, it is quite legitimate to argue your case for retaining the method/argument in the manuscript.

The peer review process is an integral part of the publication procedure. It does rely on personal appraisal and opinion and so is open to some bias. It is not uncommon for two reviewers to have differing views, though this can often be a strength of the review process rather than a weakness. When the process is respected and done well by both reviewers and authors, it usually works quite well. However should we stay with the status quo? Is it time to consider open peer review?

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