

EDITORIAL

REVIEWING PEER REVIEW

Recently a psychologist, who is based at a teaching hospital, called to ask if I could provide scientific evidence of behavioral interventions to lessen or eliminate myopia. I gave him several references and he asked if the articles were in peer reviewed journals.

This is not an unusual question for those in academia. In this environment peer review (or refereeing) is understood to represent a standard that ensures quality, integrity and intellectual honesty. Indeed, in many universities and colleges it is an important factor in the consideration for a faculty person's retention, promotion or tenure. It is not uncommon that publication in a non-peer reviewed journal carries no credit, and there is a hierarchy of those that are peer reviewed with corresponding credits given. However, peer review is something more than a standard; it entails a process. Although this process varies somewhat from journal to journal, its core is universal. Optometrist James R. Gregg summarized it nicely:

Manuscripts for scientific journals are generally "refereed." Before publication they are reviewed by experts in the subject of the paper who judge its merits and make recommendations to the editor, who, guided by the referees, then decides whether to reject the paper or to publish with or without revisions. The referees are not experts in writing and are not to be concerned with technical editing,

*though many cannot resist the urge to do some editing.*¹

Note that the terms "peer reviewed" and "refereed" are used interchangeably. Yet, in some instances they do not entail the same process. For example, some journals have a (peer) review board whose members have expertise in a particular area. The editor does an initial review and then, if he or she deems the paper to be potentially publishable, sends it to the appropriate review board member. After evaluating the paper, that person has the option of further consultation by sending it on to a person who is usually designated as a referee. In some other journals the evaluation is done by several of the peer review board, and only in rare occasions are others called upon. The system used is usually a product of the extent of the field or profession that the journal covers: the wider the scope, the more likely is the peer review/referee system used.

The system is not perfect. Some have been quite vocal about some of the problems. For example, Readings has taken the stance that it can serve to keep the status quo by negatively reviewing ... "exciting, innovative, and challenging work by younger scholars and find reason to reject it."² Harnard has pointed out that neither the editors nor reviewers are infallible; that the editors can be mistaken in their choice of reviewers, or misapply the advice given by the reviewers.³ I propose that there is another problem that has become increasingly pronounced.

It is inevitable that papers will be rejected. And, particularly with novice writers who have put great enthusiasm and effort in preparing the work, it can be quite devastating. Thus, the rejection itself can be traumatic even to those who have already been published, but at least as important is the method of rejection. It seems that how rejection is transmitted to the author has become, in many instances, cold and less than civil. I know of no more effective method to discourage an individual from writing. President of the American Psychological Association, Robert J. Sternberg recently addressed this issue. He points out that

Continued on page 19

EDITORIAL continued

savage reviews are inherently destructive, not constructive, often hypocritical, and misleading. Dr. Sternberg states that

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they reflect poorly on the field itself, and more particularly on the editors and publishers who allow them to occur. He calls on the editors and publishers to be take measures to eliminate this problem.⁴

Dr. Sternberg's belief that the process should be constructive and not destructive is a key point. And as he further suggests, it is a paramount responsibility of editors and publishers to eliminate incivility in the peer review process. I believe that there is a further implication in his words: that in the best of all worlds the process should be constructed to encourage and not discourage authors to write. This would necessitate that for all rejected papers, and including even those that do not pass the editor's initial review, he or she offer concrete recommendations to improve the paper. It is my experience in this journal and as peer reviewer for other publications that there are papers that are beyond redemption, but that they are relatively few in number.

Another way to improve the process is to make authors more aware of the essential rules of the process. All peer-reviewed journals, to my knowledge, publish "authors' guidelines" or "instructions to authors" at least once a year. These are certainly helpful but, in my opinion, are somewhat general. Over the past year I, with input from members of this journal's editorial board and peer review panel, have put together a new format that our reviewers complete for each manuscript sent to them. It is a work in progress and has become increasingly structured. While it was designed for the peer reviewers, an edited version is printed as an appendix to this editorial for the benefit of authors. I believe that it can be used as a guide for them not only for this journal, but as a basic generic instrument for virtually all peer reviewed publications. It is offered as a means to smooth the journey of review for both authors and peer reviewers.

There are imperfections in the peer review process. Nevertheless, it has met the test of time and is the best quality control mechanism available to those publications that seek this type of review. The process can be improved and expedited by first giving authors specific information on what is expected and

then constructive feedback. In a sense this educates the consumer (author) to the rules by which the provider (journal) operates so that further communication is enhanced.

References

1. Gregg JR. Wanted: Optometric Writers. Santa Ana, CA: Optom Ext Prog, Curric II Vol 58;1986: 57.
2. Readings B. Caught in the Net: Notes from the electronic underground. Surfaces 1994;4:9-10,

3. Harnad S. Policing the paper chase. (Review of S. Lock, A difficult balance: Peer review in biomedical publication.) Nature 1986;322:24-25.
4. Benson E. In search of a more perfect union. Monitor on Psychol Jan 2003:41-42.

CHECK SHEET FOR ALL ARTICLES

1. Does the title accurately reflect the article's content?
2. Does the abstract give an accurate synopsis of the article?
3. Is the abstract too long, too short, or of appropriate length?
4. Are the key words basic to the article?
5. Are opinions and statements of fact properly expressed or numbered in text?
6. Are the items in the reference list accurately and appropriately documented?
7. Are commercial products properly referenced in the text?
8. Do these products accurately and appropriately appear in the source list?
9. Have the author(s):
Provided a statement that this is an original article, not submitted elsewhere?
Provided a statement regarding financial or other interest in commercial products?
10. Is the article's purpose clearly and concisely stated in the abstract and text?
11. Does the text flow in a logical manner?
12. Are there appropriate headings and subheadings in the text?
13. Are figures and tables accurate and appropriately titled?
14. Are figures and tables referred to in the text?
15. Are sentences clear, concise, and grammatically correct?
16. Has permission been granted to include previously published photos, tables and figures?

FOR RESEARCH ARTICLES

17. Does the "Subject" section provide full details of the subjects?
18. Does the "Materials" section provide appropriate and full details?
19. Does the "Procedures" section provide appropriate and full details?
20. Were appropriate statistical methods used?
21. Is the presentation in "Results" based on accurate interpretation of the statistics, and presented in a clear, concise and logical manner?

FOR CASE PRESENTATIONS

22. Have the chief complaints been given?
23. Are the patient's age, sex and occupation presented?
24. Have the visual and medical histories been given?
25. Are the tests that were done appropriate?
26. Are the results clearly stated?
27. Are the clinical encounters dated or appropriately designated?
28. Are the diagnosis(es) and management for each encounter specified?

(REMAINDER FOR ALL ARTICLES)

29. Does the "Discussion" section serve as a useful and accurate expanded summary of the article?
30. Are the "Conclusions" appropriate, logical and do they contain a "take home message" for the reader?
31. Is this article appropriate for *JBO* (or the journal of choice) and of value to its readers?