

The Unknown Reviewer: an Expression of Policy and Gratitude

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Like almost everything else on the medical scene today, the review process used by medical journals has received searching reppraisal and many recent commentaries. The list that follows indicates the main topics that have received public attention. Each topic in the list is accompanied by a paraphrased question. The ensuing discussion contains the "pro" and "con" answer the questions, together with a statement of the corresponding editorial policy of this journal.

1. *Anonymous reviewers (Should all reviews be signed?)*

The advantage of signed reviews is that they promote responsibility in the reviewer. The disadvantage is that they might inhibit free expression, particularly by younger reviewers who may fear revenge if an older, established authority is angered by unflattering comments. – Our editorial policy has been *laissez faire*. We let the reviewer choose to sign or not sign.

2. *Anonymous authors (Should the author's identity be hidden when the manuscript is reviewed?)*

The obvious advantage of this policy is the objectivity it promotes in the reviewer. The disadvantage is that the "mask" of objectivity is often perforated. Various entries in the text or references will often give clear hints about the source, and sometimes the actual authors, of a manuscript. – The JCD has not yettried the anonymus author technique. We would be eager to hear what our readers think about it.

3. *Unreviewed rejections (Should editors be forbidden from rejecting a manuscript without soliciting a review?)*

The advantage of this policy is that authors (or at least, editors) will always receive substantive comment on each submitted manuscript. The disadvantage is that editors may have to find and use the time of reviewers for manuscripts that may be clearly unsuitable for a journal's audience. – Because we not want

to waste the time of our reviewers, we sometimes will reject, without review, a manuscript whose topic or focus seems inappropriate for the *Journal of Chronic Diseases*. The event occurs uncommonly, probably a relative frequency less than 0.05.

4. *Unannotated rejection (Should authors of a rejected manuscript always receive copies of the reviewers' comments?)*

The answer to this question depends on the answer to the next question.

5. *Author/editor focus of the reviewer (For whom is a reviewer writing: the editor or the author?)*

If writing for the author, the reviewer should provide (whenever possible) a citation of what is good or bad about the manuscript, together with constructive comments about how to repair the defects that have been identified. If writing for the editor, the reviewer can merely offer concise recommendations about acceptance or rejection, together with a brief justification for the decision. – Like many other editors, we ask our reviewers to do both. The comments for the authors will (we hope) offer useful suggestions about what is wrong and how to improve it, although we do not expect the reviewers to go into extensive detail. The recommendations to the editor need not be specifically justified if the main virtues and defects are cited in the comments to the authors. We think the comments for the authors are (or should be) an important part of post-graduate education in the research world, and we always pass those comments along to the authors. In fact – as noted in an earlier editorial [1] – when a reviewer makes no comments to the authors, we sometimes (if authorized by the reviewer) send along excerpts of pertinent comments made to the editors.

6. *The double-jeopardy review process (Should an author be exposed to the risk of receiving the same reviewers if a manuscript rejected by one journal is sent to another journal?)*

This question has a further ramification. Should editors establish a “central reviewing authority” to which all manuscripts are sent by all journals? With this type of arrangement, a manuscript rejected by the first journal to which it is submitted would essentially be rejected by all journal that rely on the central reviewing authority. – Mindful of the many important papers (sometimes by winners of Nobel prizes) that were rejected by prestigious journals and expert authorities, we do not like this policy. It might save the world a lot of bad papers, but it would also suppress some of the best. We prefer not only to avoid a “central reviewing authority”, but also to find a different reviewer if someone we ask has seen the paper previously. We would risk accepting an occasional sub-optimal paper than rejecting a good one, although we hope that

our reviewers will save us from the poor while encouraging the good.

7. Rigid time limits (Should a manuscript automatically be sent to another reviewer if the first reviewer exceeds a stipulated time limit?)

This policy seems quite reasonable, and we should like to use it, but its enforcement requires a full-time person (or persons) to act as a constant monitor for the time deadlines. Without the funds for such personnel, we often telephone potential reviewers in advance to be sure they will accept the manuscript and promise to review it promptly. When we later discover that the reviewer has not honored the promise, we sometimes extend the time deadline if a chastened reviewer assures us of a prompt review. The total review process will usually be shorter if a delayed reviewer, responding to another telephone call, sends back a review quickly, than if we try to find an entirely new reviewer and start the process from the beginning.

None of these policies is sacrosanct, permanent, or immutable. They represent what we have been doing, not necessarily what is best. If we had full-time editors and a full-time staff, we might prefer some changes, but editing a journal – like research itself – is often a compromise between what is ideal and what is practical. We would welcome comments and suggestions from our readers about these policies or any aspect of the editorial review process at the JCD.

In the meantime, we have assembled a list of the many reviewers who have served this journal, its authors, and its readers since the last time we made our public acknowledgment about two years ago. We should like to thank our reviewers and to re-iterate our gratitude for their services. Many authors – even with rejected manuscripts – have written us to thank the reviewers for their perceptive criticisms and constructive comments.

We are particularly pleased and proud that the *Journal* in the past few years has maintained and perhaps augmented its previous reputation for thoughtful, worthwhile review of manuscripts. As editors, we do our to find excellent reviewers who really deserve the credit, however. Among our prime reviewers are the members of our editorial and consultant boards. They are listed on the inside covers of each issue of the JCD, but this occasion gives us the chance to thank them again for their talents and devoted service. The list that follows contains the names of all the otherwise anonymous persons who have contributed to the *Journal's* review processes in the past two years. We acknowledge those reviewers here with deep gratitude.

References

- Feinstein A.R., 1986, Some ethical issues among editors, reviewers and readers, *J Chron Dis*, 39, 491-493