

EDITORIAL

Manuscript Peer Review for Emerging Journals: Where We Go from Here?

Salem A Beshyah^{1,3} and Elmahdi A Elkhammas^{2,3}

¹Center for Diabetes and Endocrinology, Sheikh Khalifa Medical City, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

²Department of Surgery, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA

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Corresponding author: Dr. Salem Beshyah E-mail: Beshyah@yahoo.com

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The process of peer review of submitted manuscripts is widely perceived as a cornerstone of assuring quality in academic journalism (1-3). Submitted manuscripts are forwarded to colleagues usually 2 or more who are expected to have in-depth knowledge in the topic of the manuscript. These 2 colleagues “peers” would read the manuscript very carefully and help the authors to improve the readability of the manuscript by commenting in detail on its content, format, and so on. They are usually asked to make, in a confidential way, a non-biased review to help the editor evaluating the scientific credibility of the manuscript and make recommendation about acceptance and revisions or rejection of the manuscript.

There are many volumes of articles, guidelines and instructions to authors that are meant to guide new or less experienced reviewers through the steps of assessing a manuscript (1-3). These are usually written in general terms if they are in a journal article or a book chapter and

more as publication-specific if they are posted on a journals or publishers websites. Many are amply detailed to clarify the most important elements of the review process and to discuss common pitfalls and their avoidance. Reiterating or actually re-presenting these arguments in any amount of detail are outside the scope of this editorial. However, it can be briefly emphasized that a good peer review will at least have clear and concise explanations of what the author is trying to convey in the beginning. It should provide rational justification for why this manuscript is important to the field and why the readers of this particular journal would be interested. A clear, concise and thorough description of evidence to support premises in manuscript and/or methods used and cogent, meaningful and influential discussion section should not be left to readers’ imaginations (4).

Having been the managing editors of this Journal almost since its inception, we have often thought that the problem of not getting reviewers motivated enough to accept this

task and respond in a timely fashion is a problem unique to emerging journals, those that are based in the developing world (even nominally on occasions) or those which have no impact factor to quote yet. Although to be fair we still get adequate numbers of responses to sustain our “peer-review” editorial policy, we regrettably still find our requests too often face either a “courteous decline” but more often a “benign neglect”. Very rarely, fortunately so, we face the question of “what’s in it for me?”, the request to be on the editorial board as a condition of performing a review, or the explicit request for a financial incentive!. We have often attributed these to the fact that we are yet a new journal or that we are not yet indexed in the pubmed/medline database. However, were interested to read a recent editorial in a well established journal echoing the same concerns (5). The aforementioned editorial highlighted the serious shortage of reviewers! We concur with the view that acting as a reviewer requires spending a considerable amount of time in reading manuscripts and generating a more or less lengthy list of comments about all aspects of a given manuscript, though under the current arrangement, reviewers get no academic credit or financial compensation for this demanding job (3-5). Searching for reviewers has become a time-consuming task with long delays and delays, in some bad cases this can require weeks or even months to formulate an editorial decision based on the peer-reviewers assessment as some colleagues do not respond quickly if at all. In practice, this results in the fact that searching for reviewers quite often becomes a time-consuming task, in some bad cases this can require weeks or even months as some colleagues are slow responders. We have not performed a systematic analysis, but our guess is that we have to ask 5 on average colleagues to end up with 2 who are willing to review a given manuscript. In some cases we have had to ask 10 or more colleagues to find the minimal 2 reviewers required. We reject manuscripts right away once we have the impression that they do not fit into the scope of our journal or when the manuscript have clear flaws that make not suitable for publication and thus we save our willing reviewers’ time and effort.

Several suggestions have been put forward to engage more reviewers namely the creation of a database with potential reviewers, the publication of actual reviewers at the end of the year and the recruitment of young and aspiring colleagues and training them to become peer reviewers to advance their academic careers and secure our future. We also think it is crucial that the we dispel the widely held myths that to be a reviewer, one has to be the world’s or nation’s top expert on

the subject. Senior academics and researchers has a duty to recruit and train younger reviewers by hands on training on requests for peer reviewers’ requests they receive rather than rejecting them. Additionally, we also propose that the effort of the peer review process is publicly credited to the reviewers in the articles on individual bases. We agree that early phase of the review process may remain blinded to both authors and reviewers despite some reservations on these practices, an argument that is beyond the scope of the current editorial (6).

Increasing number of online journals started indeed to formally include the authors, the editors and peer reviewers on their articles with each with his role well defined. We think this practice should be encouraged and should be embraced with more journals. We firmly believe in this day and age when “academic productivity” is being closely scrutinized, enabling clinicians and academics to enlist objectively their contributions detailed as authorship, editorship and peer reviewer-ship more readily. We invite readership to comment and propose new ideas.

There is an ever increasing number of publications, many of which are embracing the open access principles (7). The increase in open access journals has casted some shadow of doubt on their credibility without generalization (8). We agree that authors, invited editorial board members ought to exercise caution when dealing with journals with no clear track record and whose affiliation is not very clearly identified on their web sites or who comes from obscure publishers that releasing huge numbers of titles in all fields with or two names of editorial members repeated in all journals. However, we strongly argue that many open access journals need to be there to give time and space for publications from the developing countries, regional issues and nurture young and aspiring researchers from emerging regions They need more help and support with styling, language and presentation that editorial staff of established journals cannot afford. Despite the good will and highest level of commitment from the editors, reviewers are equally vital to maintain a true peer-review process (9-11). Protracted editorial processes may disengage authors and put a journal in disrepute. In the meantime, having to send repeated reminders to reviewers are really time-wasting and truly exhausting for editors. Though we do this in the hope that a new email may catch the eyes of another reviewer.

As we reflect on the problem of shortage of peer reviewers’ availability and willingness, we make this plea again to all

our reviewers to respond to our requests promptly (positively or negatively; though we always hope for the former) and also deal with them timely. Undoubtedly, any seriously written review will help the editorial process. Reciprocal exchange of support between authors and reviewers is essential for a healthy scientific environment passionate about taking research work, writing and publishing in medicine and biomedical sciences leaps forward.

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