Invited commentaries on: Peer review and editorial decision-making†

EDITOR CREATES JOURNAL

Every journal has its own character. This is a reflection of the editor's interests and concerns, his conception of what the journal is there to do. He selects out of all the papers offered by contributors those which by subject-matter fit the journal's points of view. A journal may be called *Clinical Psychiatry* and will then obviously not publish papers on the chemistry of helium or the early poetry of T. S. Eliot, but what about human brain physiology or animal psychology? Observations on homosexuality in dogs, perhaps, but not experimental alcoholism in rats? Behavioural problems in people with diabetes, treatment of the epilepsies, fear of flying, depiction of suicide in opera? Where will the editor be tempted to extend the boundary of acceptance?

The journal may be addressed to a readership of specialist practitioners, which also includes groups of general practitioners and physicians, academics, public health epidemiologists; how far should it go to meet also their special interests, and go beyond the experience of clinic and ward in publishing relevant biological science or special investigations? Is it for discussion of theoretical issues, or organisation of mental health services as well as the recording of useful and reliable clinical observations and human experimental results – the evidence for effectiveness of some therapy, for example? Will it help in some aspect of daily practice, stimulate new interests or revive neglected but potentially useful old ones, provoke illuminating discussion, promote continuing education, re-enthuse the jaded practitioner?

The journal should lead and not follow. The editor will not rely simply on what the mail happens to deliver in choosing papers, reports and letters, but will go out inviting review articles, leaders, comments, dialogues and studies from active researchers, to widen interests and catch the new. Yet space is limited by the costs of paper, printing, postage by weight. Some subjects are worth more space than others (perhaps on grounds of topicality, novelty of syndrome, number of patients studied, etc), but very long papers, 7000–10 000 words and upward, are particularly liable to rejection on length alone. Is the editor's decision final?

A scientific journal is not a place for rhetoric or literary flourishes. The editor is there on the reader's behalf to promote intelligibility – clear, simple, precise exposition, so that he, and every professional reader, can understand every paper, specialised though it may be. Some authors are so immersed in their subject they forget to explain it enough to others. Some will try to publish the same results several times over, make results up, plagiarise. This is where peer review may spot the deceit. The main role of an assessor, however, is narrower than that of the editor: it is to report from her or his particular specialist knowledge and experience on the relevance and novelty of a paper's subject treatment, the author's acquaintance with the literature, the aptness of the methods of observation and how well they have been executed, the reliability of the results, the reasonableness of the conclusions. If there are deficiencies here, perhaps they can be remedied by rewriting, with additional information. But without rewriting, the paper may yet have some particular merits which influence an editor to accept, possibly printing with it a critical comment pointing to its limitations. Bad work in a novel field may stimulate better work later. Observations may be good but the conclusions nonsense. But this may lead off on a false trail, and excite unfounded hopes of treatment or anxieties about developing illness fanned by the daily press. The editor has the responsibility to maintain a high standard of reliable information, and to exclude ideas and speculative predictions for which no shred of supporting fact is offered. It is a balancing act, trying not to overlook the useful new or to discourage the author, and at the same time not to add to the flood of trivia, misinformation and tedious repetition about to engulf us through ever more journals, the daily press and the Internet.

Many papers would stand a better chance of acceptance if their authors had had honest advice and frank criticism (a) at the start of their research, making sure its plan and methods were adequate, and (b) in the early draft, to confirm orderly, comprehensive and intelligible writing. Even writing up a case, or making a report, can often be improved with a little teaching from a friendly critic.

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QUANTIFYING QUALITY

Scientific research on the process of peer review and editorial decision-making is rather like trying to grasp the intangible. There is a certain amount that can be quantified, such as the number of characteristics of the paper (specified by the journal) which the assessor rates. But as with so many numerical formulations, what is expressed in numbers may leave out something of what is really most important. There has been an increasing tendency, largely imported from America, to 'measure' aspects of quality and then use these numbers to compare individuals or institutions. So we now have 'successful' schools, hospital 'league tables', 'efficient' police forces, and academic departments which do well or ill on the research assessment exercise. One fire brigade said that the only way they could get a good rating would be to start some fires and then put them out, since their successful preventive work was not counted. There is a possible danger that similar distortions could apply to the publication process.

Like democracy, peer review is the worst possible system – except for all the others. Until about the 1960s, editors of learned journals usually made up their own minds as to whether or not to accept a paper (that was certainly my experience as

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a neophyte author). Then they began to use a small circle of colleagues to help with more specialised topics, as every discipline began to diversify. So the process has gone on, until *Nature* has some 14 000 possible assessors on its books. Assessors are all busy people, reviewing a paper conscientiously may take several hours, and there is no pay for this anonymous work; people do it for the collective good of the scientific community. Any editor soon finds out who is good at it and who skimps it or refuses to do his or her share.

The overwhelming fact of life for all reputable journals is that there is never enough space, so it is not surprising that Howard & Wilkinson found that assessors and editors tended to agree more on what is clearly *not* suitable for publication. Since at least three papers out of four sent to the *British Journal Psychiatry* (BJP) will have to be rejected, manuscripts have to be assessed with a predominantly negative mental set. Not all assessors, and very few authors, understand that only the editor can make the final decision about publication, because only he (or eventually she) knows how one particular manuscript compares with all the others under review. An assessor can only say whether a submission would be *suitable* for that particular journal, not whether it should be accepted at that time.

Serious interest in peer review has been shown only for about the past decade or so, particularly since the publication of Stephen Lock's (1985) *A Difficult Balance*. It is right that there should be concern about the process, but how much we have usefully learnt from the studies done during this time is perhaps rather uncertain. There are some obvious dangers in peer review, such as a clique with a particular viewpoint obtaining a stranglehold on all publications in one field. Cases like that have occurred, but they seem to be rare, and it is very difficult to see how any formal sanctions can prevent them. It is really up to the practitioners themselves to preserve free speech.

Howard & Wilkinson ask whether an increase in the number of assessors per paper would improve matters. My experience was that three conscientious reports per paper is the maximum useful number. After that, they tend to start contradicting themselves and confusing the author. Furthermore, it wastes the time of assessors, who could be reviewing other submissions.

This paper has raised some very useful issues and it is good to hear that further research is under way. The latest report on the BJP's high impact factor shows that they must be doing something right. But in the end, a journal's quality depends on editorial flair, which is very difficult to quantify.

Lock, S. (1985) *A Difficult Balance: Editorial Peer Reviews in Medicine*. London: Nuffield Provincial Hospitals Trust.

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