Improving Review Quality and Referee Engagement

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"By increasing the quality of reviews, you will spend less time waiting for unhelpful reviews," stated Emma Pfordresher-Shumeyko, senior program coordinator of the American Society of Clinical Oncology. Pfordresher-Shumeyko and Mary Beth Schaeffer, managing editor of Annals of Internal Medicine, discussed the key factors in obtaining high-quality reviews. The three main factors, as stated by Pfordresher-Shumeyko, are high-quality submissions, enthusiastic editors, and engaged referees.

Pfordresher-Shumeyko stated that in 2007, Thomson Reuters’ Journal Citation Reports listed 132 journals in the oncology category. By 2011, that number had increased to 196; 64 new oncology journals were recognized by Thomson Reuters in just 4 years. "More journals and increasing demands on a specialist’s time make having a pool of referees who are dedicated and excited to review for your journal enormously helpful," she said.

The American Society of Clinical Oncology, Pfordresher-Shumeyko said, is beginning to see a larger gap between the number of reviews that it needs to solicit and the number that are being completed each year. The number of reviews completed rose by 40% from 2005 to 2012, but the number that it needed to solicit rose by 62% in the same period. She suggested that a journal should encourage newer professionals to review through a referee-training program that allows a veteran referee to choose fellows or residents to share in reviews. The editor of the journal can then provide comments to the veteran on the quality of the newer professionals’ review and decide whether a new fellow or resident can be added to the reviewer pool. That method will help to establish loyalty to the journal.

Pfordresher-Shumeyko stated that “issues with referee availability will probably be seen in more specialties as professionals older than 50 years gradually move into retirement and fewer people are available to replace them. With this upcoming workforce shift, it’s more important than ever for a journal to secure an engaged pool of referees.” She also said that ease of reviewing can help to improve review quality. A referee should be given clear expectations by the journal, and it should be easy to accept a review assignment and submit a review through the journal’s submission Web site. Referee enticements, such as acknowledgments in the journal, can also help to obtain reviewers.

Schaeffer stated that her editorial office sends letters to referees from the editor-in-chief, thanking them for taking the time to review. She outlined the components of a high-quality review. They include timeliness, constructive and concise recommendations, and substantiated comments about the strengths and weaknesses of a paper. Reviews for Annals of Internal Medicine must adhere to review guidelines, including the expectation that a potential reviewer will decline to review if there is a conflict of interest. She stated that a good review should include ways to improve a paper even if it is not accepted.

She said that one incentive for referees to accept reviewer invitations is getting continuing-medical-education (CME) credit for completing on time a review that receives a high score on the basis of its quality. Referees are told about the possibility of CME credit when asked to review, according to Schaeffer. CME credit is granted for reviewing original research articles and reviews but not humanities pieces or editorials.

Schaeffer stated that in the last year, Annals of Internal Medicine received 80% of its reviews on time, 93% within 7 days of the due date, and 98% within 10 days of the due date. In closing, she discussed some ways to increase the pool of reviewers: reaching out to attendees of subspecialty meetings, e-mailing existing reviewers, and allowing junior faculty to assist with reviews.