

# A Question of Reviewer Confidentiality

Editor's Note: To allow readers more time to submit solutions, responses in this column will now appear 2 issues after the questions were posed. Thus, please see the next issue for responses to "A Question of Terminology", which appeared in the March-April issue.

## Question

A member of a professional society becomes editor of its periodical. As editor, she has access to records on peer reviewers

assigned to manuscripts in recent years, and she plans to consider these records when choosing reviewers. One problem, though: Authors are not to know the identity of reviewers of their manuscripts, but before assuming her current role, the editor had some articles published in the periodical. What should she do in this situation?

## Solutions

The new chief editor is appropriate in wishing to consider the reliability of potential

peer reviewers. However, the editor should refrain from considering records of reviews of her own publications in or considered by the journal. The priority is to follow the journal's policy of masking the identity of reviewers from authors. The editor's wish to consider records is insufficiently compelling to change this policy. Furthermore, if the editor chooses to submit manuscripts for publication in the journal that she now edits, her submissions should be subject to the same procedure and consideration as

others. It follows that she, as author-editor, should not be informed of the identity of reviewers of her own submissions.

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The new editor should ask that all reviews of her manuscripts and the identity of all referees involved be removed from any manual or electronic files to which she has access. These records should be stored and handled in a way that would be sure to maintain this confidentiality.

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With the availability of electronic storage and retrieval, journals have typically retained records of reviews, including confidential comments not returned to authors. When a new editor takes over responsibility for a journal, the outgoing editor should remove the confidential comments from any manuscripts on file written by the incoming editor to avoid unduly influencing her opinions on any of the journal's reviewers (either positively or negatively). Some of these confidential reviewer records are kept for several years, and only correspondence and comments that were returned to the author should be retained for the incoming editor's papers.

**Elaine Monsen**  
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Our journal faced this situation. The incoming editor had been an author of manuscripts reviewed anonymously and published in the journal before he assumed his role as editor-in-chief. He now has electronic access to records that can reveal the names of people who reviewed his papers and their overall ratings of those papers. The actual reviews, however, exist only on paper and are stored in an archive to which he does not have access.

If our manuscript-tracking software had allowed us to easily block the names of reviewers of the incoming editor's manuscripts, we would have done so, but that option was not available. I decided it would not be necessary to block any records, however, because I was convinced of the incoming editor's integrity. He would be above such pettiness as wishing to retaliate for negative reviews. A practical consideration reinforced this decision: His published research was considered so excellent that no strongly negative reviews of his papers were in our files. I expect that most people chosen as editors-in-chief have similar track records and are considered to be of high integrity. Thus, the simple solution that we chose would generally be available to any journal.

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### **New Question: A Question of Courtesy**

You, an author's editor, are editing a book review. The review is well written and speaks favorably of the book author's research. In addition to describing the author's life work, the reviewer comments extensively on the author's background and motivations. This commentary is based not only on published materials but also on the reviewer's interaction with the author in professional settings over the years. You wonder whether you should advise the reviewer to obtain permission from the author to include the commentary or whether at least the book author should have, as a professional courtesy, a chance to review the review before submission. How should you proceed?

The situations described as New Questions in this column are not necessarily based on actual situations, and the ones that are may have been modified to focus the question. Send your responses to the new question to Della Mundy, Kaiser Foundation Research Institute, Department of Medical Editing, 1800 Harrison Street, 16th Floor, Oakland CA 94612-3429; telephone 510-987-3573; fax 510-873-5131; e-mail, [della.mundy@ncal.kaiperperm.org](mailto:della.mundy@ncal.kaiperperm.org)