

by Della Mundy

A Question of External Validity

Interested authors will have read in the March-April issue of *Science Editor* about survey findings indicating that study-design flaws and inadequate methodologic detail are often responsible for manuscript rejection,¹ but that insufficient recognition of previous research, ignoring important work by others, and duplication of previous work rarely, if ever, lead to manuscript rejection. Elsewhere in the same issue, a synopsis noted how “early scientists and scientific societies transformed science from an anonymous process” (“based on the Baconian ideal of collective research: Truth is UNcovered, not DIScovered”) to one in which “science grew into a means of evaluating the work of persons who were outside the established society” in which “authorship is key” and “identity contributes to credibility”.² I invite your comments on what the survey findings indicate for future bioscientific article format and on how the current trend toward informal exchange of information in online discussion groups might affect the continuum of authorship to anonymity.

1. Byrne DW. Common reasons for rejecting manuscripts at medical journals: a survey of editors and peer reviewers. *Sci Ed* 2000;23(2):39-44.

2. Kronick DA. Anonymity and identity: editorial policy in the early scientific journal. *Libr Q* 1988;58:221-37. [Synopsis by L Dirk. Views Afield. *Sci Ed* 2000;23(2):53-4.]

Solutions

Just because authors ignore or fail to review previously published information on a topic in a prepublication document doesn't mean that previous information will (or should) be ignored in the paper eventually published. This is, not so incidentally, an important way in which peer-reviewed, edited, published full versions of papers differ from prepublication documents—which are essentially works in progress, not cohesive and coherent finished work—and why it is important to publish peer-reviewed and edited full papers.

Authorship should not matter (nor should reviewers' identities) prospectively,

that is, in relation to the process of acceptance for publication. Indeed, the identities of authors and reviewers ideally are masked or blinded during the review and editorial process, on much the same grounds as patients and researchers are blinded in clinical trials: to minimize preconceptions and personal bias. Authorship does and should, however, matter retrospectively, that is, for attribution, academic promotion, credit, and responsibility. In sum, authorship both does and does not matter; it depends on when and what is being done to or with a piece of scholarly work.

Predicting the future is chancy at best (look at weather reports). Given the various pressures and counterpressures in scholarly work and publishing, it is difficult to predict whether authorship, attribution, and contributorship will increase or decrease as a concern. My guess is that this concern will increase, largely because the sheer volume and reach of electronic publication will increase the need for clues to the validity of information. Otherwise, I think electronic publication is something of a side issue in relation to authorship: Authorship issues existed before electronic publication and in most ways have little to do with the electronic “revolution”.

Frank Davidoff
Chief Editor

Annals of Internal Medicine
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The editorial survey published in *Science Editor*¹ reflects my own experience in that manuscripts are rejected overwhelmingly because of deficiencies in their methodology. Modern science is an exercise in seeking truth about the world around us. Bronkowski² may have stated this idea best in his proposition that learning of reliable experimental findings as a facet of the truth was the “mainspring which has moved our civilization since the Renaissance.” Thus, research designed so poorly that its results have questionable validity wastes valuable intellectual capital. Editors are loath to add insult to this scientific injury by wasting page space on it. Compared with that irreparable assault

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, Department of Medical Editing, Kaiser Foundation Research Institute, 1800 Harrison Street, 16th Floor, Oakland CA 94712-3429. Telephone 510-987-3573; fax 510-873-5131; e-mail della.mundy@kp.org.

continued

on the scientific method, lack of recognition of previous work can be a minor flaw that can be repaired in the revision process for deserving papers.

Although the process of delineating authorship holds purveyors of the truth accountable for their pronouncements, it does not guarantee acceptance of their ideas. Yet in a world where microeconomics allows distribution of megabytes for millicents, anyone who can type can quickly gain access to a global audience rapidly and cheaply. In the filtering out of the truth from the trash, identifiable credibility may regain greater currency in scientific exchange. We might be less likely to discard works of those with established credibility than works of unknown provenance, but eventually any work will have to stand the test of time.

Bruce B Dan
President, MedNet Communications
and former Senior Editor JAMA
Bethesda, Maryland

New Question: A Question of Ownership

A coordinator for an institution's departmental publication archive searches the National Library of Medicine's PubMed database to locate any articles written by department authors that might have been published recently. A record of an article is retrieved. It shows that one author of the article is a staff member and another author is in a different institution; but only the other institution is shown as the source of the article, and there is no attribution to the archivist's institution. On checking the manuscript's title page submitted earlier, the archivist verifies that both institutions were listed. Is it appropriate to request that an erratum (now commonly used to correct data errors or omission of authors from PubMed database records) be added to ensure complete and accurate attribution?

1. Byrne DW. Common reasons for rejecting manuscripts at medical journals: a survey of editors and peer reviewers. *Sci Ed* 2000;23:39-44.
2. Bronkowski J. Science and human values. New York: Harper & Row; 1965.

**Fourth International Congress
on Peer Review in Biomedical Publication
14-16 September 2001
Barcelona, Spain**

This congress, organized by JAMA and the BMJ Publishing Group, will feature 3 days of research presentations. For information, see www.ama-assn.org/peer or contact Annette Flanagin, JAMA, 515 N State Street, Chicago, IL 60610, telephone 312-464-2432, fax 312-464-5824, e-mail annette_flanagin@ama-assn.org.