

How Journals Can Attract (and Keep) the Best Papers

Chair:

Allison Laird

British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology
London, UK

Panelists:

Laurie Goodman

Genome Research
Cold Spring Harbor, New York

Edward J O'Connell

Annals of Allergy, Asthma, & Immunology
Rochester, Minnesota

John M Grant

British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology
London, UK

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Human Molecular Genetics
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The relationship between authors and editors is not always pretty, as pointed out by Allison Laird. However, it is in editors' interest to be as efficient, timely, and courteous as possible when dealing with manuscripts. If you have already covered these basics but want to go further, what can you do to improve the quality of manuscripts submitted to *Your Favorite Journal*? This session covered the options available to journal editors to make substantive changes in their publications.

The Catch-22 Paper-Submission Cycle

The first case study presented was that of *Genome Research*. Laurie Goodman pointed out the vicious circle of mediocrity that can develop: If your journal gets only medi-

ocre papers, and that's all you publish, then you will get even more mediocre papers from authors who have read your journal and think that's what you want. The first step in breaking the cycle is to increase the rejection of mediocre papers. An important caveat is that the journal will be thinner for some period, and submission rates will temporarily decline. Editors can use this period to try to attract the papers they do want by focusing on particular subjects in editorials or commentaries and by getting in touch with authors in desired fields. For example, the *Genome Research* editors decided to focus on the burgeoning bioinformatics arena and thus established their journal as the home for new and exciting papers that had previously been "homeless". Editors should also offer incentives, if they are available, such as rapid review, journal distribution at meetings, or extra material highlighting particular papers. The successful application of this approach should break the mediocrity cycle and result in a higher quality of submissions.

Journal Makeover 101

Edward J O'Connell detailed another case study, *Annals of Allergy, Asthma, & Immunology*. On the basis of the results of a readership survey, the editors decided on a complete makeover, beginning with an editorial retreat to examine all aspects of the journal's operation. Changes included limiting editorial-board members to 3-year terms, increasing the involvement of the journal with the committees of its associated society, and moving to online submission and peer review. O'Connell reiterated the need for editors to talk directly to authors at meetings or in their laboratories and suggested that reviewers be asked to become more invested in the journal by soliciting manuscripts. The journal is now working with a public-relations committee

and developing a marketing program, and it has already revised the cover to be more eye-catching.

O'Connell and Goodman stressed the importance of familiarity with the competitors of a journal that is looking to move up in its specialty. As an editor, you should know whose rejects come to your journal as the next step and where papers go when your journal rejects them. Armed with this knowledge, editors can devise more specific plans to advertise the advantage of publication in their own journals. Of course, a little money always helps, and journals that can offer honoraria for particular types of articles (continued medical education, for example) should use that edge wisely.

The Importance of William Smellie

Finally, John M Grant gave an important reminder of the perils of overediting an author's work. Although editors receive many examples of poor writing, editing should remain "a compromise between changing the English to make the paper easily understandable to the reader [and] leaving sufficient of the authors' own language so that they recognize their own work". Grant expressed his opinion that scientific literature should make more use of the power of rhetoric, and he suggested further that journals give science-writing courses to potential authors. As an example of clear and understandable writing with "no jargon", Grant took the audience through some work by William Smellie (pronounced Smiley), the father of modern obstetrics.

Given the suggestions from these three experienced editors, one can almost imagine that authors and editors can reach a state of détente to improve scientific literature for everyone.

