

The Care and Feeding of Reviewers

Panelists:

Roy M Pitkin

Obstetrics & Gynecology
Washington, DC

Michael L Callaham

Annals of Emergency Medicine
San Francisco, California

Christine Arturo

Journal of the American College of Cardiology
San Francisco, California

Reporter:

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Radiation Research
Oak Ridge, Tennessee

Roy M Pitkin began this session by emphasizing that a journal is only as good as its reviewers. How do we find and instruct reviewers, educate and evaluate them, and deal with them productively?

Pitkin dealt with finding and instructing reviewers. He mentioned several time-honored ways of recruiting reviewers: including invitations with acceptance letters, using attendees at educational programs for reviewers, and soliciting reviewers at meetings or in the journal. Reviewers can also be found by examining the paper's bibliography, searching the journal's database of authors and reviewers, searching PubMed, and soliciting suggestions from the authors. Pitkin emphasized the importance of identifying reviewers to cover each aspect of a paper and recommended choosing one set of reviewers and replacing anyone who says no rather than asking more reviewers than are needed for a specific paper. Reviewers should be provided with information about

the type of article, the review criteria, the need for confidentiality, the need to disclose possible conflict of interest, and the deadline for completing the review. Pitkin pointed out that although editors tend to worry about what to tell reviewers, many reviewers fail to read all or part of the instructions!

Michael L Callaham described some of the findings of the research that has been done on peer review. Epidemiologists and statisticians tend to be better reviewers; younger reviewers tend to be better reviewers; and good reviewers are actively involved in the field. About 50% of the major medical journals rate reviewers; the rating systems have proved reasonably reliable.

Callaham then raised the question of whether reviewers are trainable. Standard

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workshops do not appear to affect performance, nor does simple feedback to mediocre reviewers. The jury is still out on the value of more-complex feedback to average reviewers. So how can we improve reviewing? Suggestions included using checklists and standardized instruments; developing formal objectives, screening, and training; giving formal instruction in how to review; and using rating systems and feedback. Editors bear the responsibility for making accurate assignments of manuscripts to reviewers, weeding out inadequate reviewers, identifying and nullifying biases, giving explicit instructions,

and providing feedback and thanks. They should also take care not to overburden good reviewers. He reminded his listeners of the section on editors' responsibilities to peer reviewers in CSE's "Policy on Responsibilities and Rights of Editors of Peer-Reviewed Journals".

Finally, Callaham summarized some of the research that has been conducted on the value of workshop participation and feedback. The results have not been promising with respect to improving the quality of reviews. However, research in peer review is still in its infancy.

What should journals provide for reviewers? Speaking from her experience as a managing editor, Christine Arturo stated that presolicitation results in better compliance. (About 50% of the attendees in the session indicated that they ask reviewers in advance.) Her journal also provides a copy of the decision letter with an exchange of reviewers' comments, thank you letters, and a letter of verification for a tenure file if a reviewer requests it. Reviewers can also be thanked by publishing a list of them in the journal. In return, journals expect high-quality reviews that are submitted on time. What options do we have for disciplining reviewers? Letters that are worded progressively more strongly depending on the number of offenses are one option, with removal from the reviewer database as the final step.

In the closing discussion, Pitkin emphasized that good peer reviewing is an essential part of scholarship but is also undervalued. Thus, he makes a practice of including a paragraph in letters of recommendation regarding a person's performance as a peer reviewer. 