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COMMENTARY

"What if We All Said No?": Removing Barriers to Peer Review

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INTRODUCTION

The peer-review process for scholarly publications subjects an author's manuscript to evaluation by experts in the same field, practice area, or subject matter.[1,2] The peer reviewer's goal is to ensure scientific quality and integrity by assessing validity and originality while filtering out poorly designed studies and or poor-quality articles.[1–3] Peer review is regarded as the best form of scientific evaluation and is a required part of scientific communication in journals since the 17th century.[4] There are four types of peer review as outlined by Elsevier and while various scientific journals may use different approaches, all have advantages and disadvantages.[4] Single-blind reviews are the most traditional method and occur when the peer reviewer is anonymous but the author is known, versus double-blind reviews where both the author and the peer reviewer are anonymous.[4] Triple-blind reviews are less common, very complex to execute, and occur when the reviewers are anonymous and the author is unknown to the reviewers and the editor.[4] Finally, in comparison to these three types, open reviews occur when the reviewer and the author are known, allowing for a more transparent process.[4] The *Journal* uses a single-blind review and invites two peer reviewers to evaluate submitted manuscripts.

One important part of the peer-review process is identifying peer-reviewers and while this may seem like the easiest step; in reality it is a challenging and rate-limiting step and is a gate keeper to the entire peer review process. Unfortunately, authors who get frustrated waiting an extended amount of time to receive a decision and feedback about their manuscript may not realize that the delay may be due to the struggle to find peers to conduct the review. It is very common for an article's assigned Associate Editor (AAE) to receive repeated refusals from peers to review an article and although there are legitimate reasons for turning down the review, it does not make the acquisition activity any easier. Therefore, the goal of this commentary is to ask the Academy, "what if we all said no?" In order words, what happens to the publication of timely, meaningful, quality scientific work if everyone is "too busy" to say yes to the offer to serve as a peer reviewer for an article? An important concept in the Academy is being a contributor, not just a consumer. The objectives of this commentary are to outline the process of identifying reviewers, to examine faculty members' professional obligation related to peer review, and to explore ways to remove barriers to peer review.

Identifying AJPE Peer Reviewers

The *Journal's* existing structure includes an Editor-in-Chief, an Associate Editorial Director, and an editorial assistant. In addition, there are five Associate Editors who are volunteers that also serve the Academy in the dissemination of scientific work related to pharmacy education. When an author submits a manuscript to the *Journal* through Editorial Manager (EM) (Aries System, North Andover, MA), it is assigned to one of the associate editors whose job is to find peer reviewers. The assigned AAE undertakes this task by searching personal classifications in EM, personal key words related to the article's topic in EM, the article's references, and/or searching the literature to find two peer reviewers. In addition, the AAE may also know subject matter, practice area, or methodological experts that could serve as peer reviewers. Overall, this process of finding peer reviewers is similar to searching for an article in OVID or PubMed. Occasionally, members of the Academy express concerns to the Associate Editors that they have not been asked to review a manuscript. Updating or editing a reviewer's profile personal

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classifications and key words is encouraged to help address this problem.

Once the search terms are entered into EM it displays the reviewers that meet the search criteria. The AAE then evaluates the list, which also includes data related to when an individual was last asked to review, whether they accepted or declined, when they last completed a review, and if they are an alternate reviewer for another manuscript. The AAE then selects two primary reviewers, as well as a given number of alternate reviewers (approximately five to ten); which may depend on the number of reviewers identified in the search or on other factors described above, such as the time of the year. AAEs generally avoid sending requests to individuals who just completed or declined a review within the last one to two months.

Once the list is vetted, an email letter is then sent to the two primary reviewers and they have three days to respond to the request before a reviewer on the alternate list is contacted. Sometimes an invited reviewer accepts after the deadline, so interested reviewers should keep the three-day timeline in mind. If a reviewer declines promptly, the EM system moves to the alternate reviewer faster than three days, but if the reviewer offers no response, the system takes the full three days before inviting an alternate reviewer. If several reviewers are invited but do not accept, the number of days can start to add up. Readers may be surprised to learn that some *Journal* invitations to review a manuscript do not receive replies and that sometimes the system may go through 20 alternate reviewers before it receives an acceptance.

Invited peer reviewers that reply with a decline and offer a reason for being unable to accept the invitation most commonly cite lack of time to complete the review. Three less common barriers to accepting a review include a conflict of interest, a perceived lack of expertise related to the manuscript's content, or lack of experience or training conducting peer reviews. While peer reviewers should express an inability to complete a peer review, there are strategies for overcoming these three barriers which may facilitate saying yes to an invitation to review. The *Journal* certainly wants high quality reviewers who are dedicated to objectively evaluating their assigned manuscript, recognizing fatal flaws and recommending the rejection of a manuscript when needed, documenting detailed feedback that pertains to the study design, clarity, content, and organization of the manuscript, and delivering their feedback in a timely manner and in a tone that encourages the author in making improvements to the article. The following strategies should help reviewers more readily accept future invitations.

Strategies for Overcoming Barriers

Although time appears to be the most common barrier to serving as a peer reviewer, the reasons for limited time vary. First, the request to serve as a peer reviewer may arrive at the beginning or end of the semester, which can be a busy time for faculty who are teaching and need to get course and lecture materials ready or finalize grades. Similarly, a request may arrive when faculty are asked to review promotion and tenure packets for internal and external colleagues, which can be a time-consuming process. Reviewers are encouraged to address this barrier by going into Editorial Manager and creating a note indicating that they are unavailable for a given timeframe. This can allow the AAE to find a different reviewer. Otherwise, if you receive a request during a busy time, unbeknownst to the AAE and you decline to review, you may not be asked again for a few months because the EM indicates when you were last asked and when you last accepted or declined. AAEs don't like to make an additional request if you recently declined. Reviewers are also encouraged to evaluate the article type prior to saying no since some reviews take less time to referee. For example, a *Journal* commentary is limited to 2000 words and should take less time to review than a 4000-word quantitative study or review article. One additional consideration is that it is also possible for an invited reviewer to ask the AAE for an extended timeframe if needed, such as one to two weeks, as sometimes accommodations can be made. Reviewers are cautioned against agreeing to conduct a review during an extremely busy time and then rushing and submitting a poor-quality review. If a reviewer agrees to review, they should take the assignment seriously and offer a complete, accurate, and thoughtful review that is grounded in helping the author(s) improve the article or study design.

Another timing concern relates to receiving requests from multiple journals in a given timeframe. Unfortunately, the managing software for the different journals do not "communicate" with each other and therefore the AAE does not know if you have received multiple requests. The best strategy for managing this timing problem is to prioritize requests for the journal(s) you have submitted your own manuscripts to that year. Some guidance suggests that you should review at least one manuscript for every article you submit regardless of acceptance or rejection, while some say this ratio should be three reviews for every one submission.[5] Completing three reviews for every submitted paper is suggested because at least two reviews are conducted for your submission and adding one review allows you to contribute back to the system.[6,7] However, you are still encouraged

to accept invitation requests even if you have not submitted an article to a given journal because your subject matter or methodological expertise is still needed to help advance the science in a given area. To help you keep track of your invitation requests and contributions, you could keep a spreadsheet of which journals you have reviewed for and how many times and when you accepted or declined a request, as well as the number of manuscripts you submitted to specific journals that year. Department chairs could facilitate this process by asking for this detailed documentation during annual reviews. The *Journal* provides a list of names of individuals who reviewed during a given year, as well as a designation for the individuals who reviewed the most articles each year. Other journals may provide annual certificates. Documenting this data will help you have a more accurate memory, which can help you more intentionally fulfill your professional obligations.

In addition to timing barriers, some reviewers have a perceived conflict of interest for a manuscript such as they know the author(s). If you believe there is conflict with the invitation, you are encouraged to reflect on whether you feel you can give an objective review, could reject the article if warranted, and could provide feedback grounded in helping the author(s) improve the manuscript. If the answer to any of these questions is a no, then make the AAE aware of the conflict.

Another barrier is receiving a request for an article where you have perceived lack of expertise in the topic. If you receive multiple requests for topics that you feel are beyond your expertise, you are encouraged to evaluate your EM profile to ensure it is update to date and accurate. However, if you are at the opposite end of the spectrum and you are not being asked to review, check your EM profile to make sure your key words are up to date and align with current research trends. Publishing your own work in a content area is another way to increase the chances of being asked to review. Similarly, if you feel you have content expertise but perceive you lack general training or experience reviewing articles, you are encouraged to participate in peer reviewer training, which is available from some journals and publishers. There is also guidance offered in the literature about conducting peer review.[8–10] Seeking a mentor to co-review the article with acknowledgement and/or permission from the AAE is a final strategy that may help you build your confidence and competence. In fact, the *Journal* has a new Reviewer Mentorship Program (RMP), to help you build your peer reviewing skills.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, reviewing manuscripts is an important professional obligation, but it can be tempting to decline a review if the request comes at a busy time. Faculty are encouraged to find ways to overcome their barriers to peer review. They should regularly document the journals they submit to and when they have accepted or declined review invitations. As a general rule faculty should review one to three papers for every article they have submitted, regardless of its acceptance or rejection. As the Academy increases in size, more articles are going to be submitted and more reviewers are going to be needed. This may be why you are receiving more requests than you have in the past. It is important to remember that serving as a reviewer allows faculty to support their colleagues, provide service to the Academy, read an interesting study, discover newly cited references, learn to be a better writer, and influence the science in their discipline. Otherwise, we are left with the thought of what happens to the science in our field if we all continue to say no?

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