

## A View on Review

Having served as an associate editor of the *Journal of Orofacial Pain* for the last year and a half, I would like to offer some observations concerning peer review of scientific manuscripts. Although some of these ideas have probably occurred to anyone who has authored a manuscript or served as a reviewer, as an associate editor one has the opportunity to see the breadth of situations that can occur in the course of manuscript review, and after repeated experience, certain patterns become evident.

Clearly, the *Journal of Orofacial Pain (JOP)* is a very highly regarded publication, as evidenced by our high “impact factor.” So, what are the reasons for the *Journal’s* success? The first reason for a high-quality end-product is, of course, that authors conduct good studies and choose *JOP* for publication of their high-quality work. However, if manuscripts were generally accepted in the form in which they are submitted to the *Journal*, I am certain that its impact factor would soon drop precipitously!

There are a number of aspects of the peer review process that yield better journal articles and, consequently, a better journal. I believe the most important reason for the success of the peer review process is that reviewers, almost without exception, take their job very seriously. My junior colleagues often ask me how long they should be taking to review a manuscript. “It seems to be taking me an entire day. Is that usual?” they ask. Although reviewers do become more facile with experience, nearly every reviewer reads a manuscript at least twice; gathers, prioritizes, and synthesizes their comments; and works hard on phrasing comments to be constructive. Just completing the detailed *JOP* reviewer form takes some time. Thus, even very experienced reviewers can spend half a day on a review. With at least 2 reviewers per article, plus the associate editor’s own review of the article and the reviewers’ comments, that is, at minimum, a full day of free consultation from one’s colleagues.

It has been interesting to observe that reviewers (as well as the associate editor) tend to agree on the disposition of a manuscript much more often than would be expected by chance. This does not mean the reviewers always raise the same criticisms or concerns. Rather, more times than not, the 2 reviewers have a similar sense about the importance of the work and the degree to which problems with the manuscript are correctable. When reviewers do disagree, it is rare that they strongly disagree, ie, one recommending acceptance or conditional acceptance and one recommending rejection. It is

the associate editor’s job to come to understand the reasons for these differences of opinion and to make a judgment concerning the disposition of the manuscript. We take this responsibility very seriously, sometimes calling in a third reviewer if we lack the necessary expertise ourselves.

Another important reason for the success of the review process is that authors, almost without exception, respect the process. This is not to say that it is ever easy to receive a negative review. Nevertheless, authors generally come to recognize that reviewers are well motivated and that reviewers and authors share the goal of improving the quality of the manuscript. Even if the manuscript is not ultimately accepted by *JOP*, the reviewers’ comments can be extremely helpful in revising the manuscript for submission to another journal.

Given the amount of time and effort reviewers spend on their initial reviews, it is distressing that once in a while an author appears to dash off a revised manuscript without taking the reviewers’ comments very seriously. The author seems to think that, when revision is invited, all one has to do is alter a few words and resubmit the paper. I, for one, have started to emphasize to authors that when the manuscript is resubmitted, it will get a very rigorous second review. Reviewers are fallible, and sometimes it is appropriate for authors to tell the associate editor and reviewers why they have chosen not to follow a reviewer’s specific suggestion in revising the manuscript. However, an entire letter explaining why the author chose to ignore the reviewers’ concerns is likely to result in frustration all around. The reviewers will be frustrated because they feel they have wasted their time doing the initial review, the associate editor will be frustrated because he or she will see the revised manuscript falling short of its potential as a contribution to the literature, and the author will likely be frustrated with the outcome—at best, a request for another revision and at worst, the rejection of the manuscript.

Luckily, this situation is the exception. Despite the considerable work involved, there is great reward in following a manuscript from submission through revision, through Dr Sessle’s cogent final editing—another great asset of our journal—to publication. Although in the end the credit for a publication goes to the authors, the publication process is, in essence, the ultimate “group project.”

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