Editorial Reviewers
What Is Their Function?

A group of editors and authors were enjoying a midnight snack recently. The repast followed an evening of dialogue among authors, editors and readers in a symposium presented by the Council of Biology Editors. An author turned to the editor of a leading medical periodical and said, “I hope this isn’t sour grapes, but a recent manuscript of mine was rejected by your editorial board. I received only a letter of rejection.”

The editor responded candidly, “Our letter to you reflected accurately our editorial philosophy. We have the responsibility to publish only reports that reflect accurately our editorial philosophy. We have the responsibility to publish original, authoritative information and this requires the assistance of both editorial board members and out-of-office reviewers. Their comments are for our use and only secondarily for the authors’ consideration. Sometimes we do return detailed comments, but often we choose to send only a letter of rejection.”

Such an approach is a marked departure from the editorial principles and practices of my office. There has been far too much emphasis upon the judgmental role of editors and referees and too little upon their contributions as constructive critics. The referee’s role in recommending acceptance or rejection of submitted manuscripts is, I believe, only one of the functions of out-of-office editorial consultation. Submission of a manuscript can be an invaluable educational experience even if the paper is rejected. The value of this learning exercise requires conscientious editorial review and the transmittal of consultants’ comments to the author. In an era when the discipline of clinical research is sadly neglected in medical schools and in postgraduate years, editorial review may serve as a key element in the continuing education of neophyte investigators. Writing skills, as well as scientific content, can be the focus of peer review. Not infrequently the organization of a manuscript betrays a lack of sophistication in formal scientific communication. In these instances, detailed comments identifying deficiencies in structure and style can be of great help to authors who intend to continue to submit manuscripts during their professional career.

The more knowledgeable researcher may benefit from editorial review when defects in the study design of an otherwise promising report are identified so that modifications can be made during continuing investigation. It is gratifying to note how often the restructuring of a clinical experiment and revision of the manuscript may result in statistically sound and clinically significant reports.

Opponents of the peer-review system maintain that biased or careless editorial reviews delay or block publication of critically important data. However, these critics often neglect to note or are unaware of the fact that rejected manuscripts often find their way into the medical literature in a vastly improved form. There is no manuscript which cannot be improved by thoughtful and conscientious review.

Physicians’ experiences during the formative years should include the preparation of written reports, since organization of a scientific manuscript clarifies thinking and is a great incentive toward intellectual curiosity. Many papers need never be submitted for publication and often should not be. However, there is intrinsic merit in the goal of preparing a manuscript for editorial review and the value of submission is vastly enhanced when the consultants’ comments are transmitted to the authors. Peer review is particularly important to the young researcher or less sophisticated investigator. It is for these reasons I consider editorial review as important for the author as it is for the editorial board.

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