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Editorial

Reviewing the Reviewers: With Our Thanks

Wah-Yun Low, PhD¹, and Colin Binns, MBBS, PhD²

The UK parliament has set many historical standards for democratic parliaments. Variants of its processes have been copied worldwide. One of its customs that has been increasing in recent years has been the use of committees, which were first mentioned in records from 400 years ago. During the 20th century, the scope of topics tackled by parliamentary committees expanded rapidly. They have ventured into many areas of society and recently, the Science and Technology Committee of the UK parliament has produced a report titled “Peer Review in Scientific Publications,”¹ a topic we would not have expected from a parliament. But it is an excellent report and well worth reading.

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors defines journal peer review as “unbiased, independent, critical assessment by experts who are not part of the editorial staff” and deems it an intrinsic part of all scholarly work. It is a process followed by this journal and most others in the health sciences. The days of articles published in non-refereed journal has passed. The function of peer review as used by this journal is to help ensure that the scientific record of information is robust. The advice that reviewers assists authors in better communicating their scientific work and provides guidance to editors on which articles are worthy of publication.

The UK report gives the following historical context of reviewing:

Peer review, in the context of publishing, can take place before or after an article is published. The first records of journal prepublication peer review date back to the 17th century, when the Royal Society’s Secretary, Henry Oldenburg, adopted it as editor of the journal, Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society. The concept of peer review, however, may be even older. The Syrian physician, Ishaq bin Ali Al Rahwi (AD 854-931) is thought to have first described the concept in his book, Ethics of the Physician. Al Rahwi apparently “encouraged doctors to keep contemporaneous notes on their patients, later to be reviewed by a jury of fellow physicians.”¹[p9]

At the Asia-Pacific Journal of Public Health (APJPH), our authors submit their manuscripts through the online system provided for our journal by Sage Publications. After submission, manuscripts are “triaged” by members of the editorial advisory panel and those that are obviously not suitable for our journal are referred back to their author(s). There are some manuscripts that are automatically rejected, such as those not having ethics committee approval or not fitting within the scope of public health. Manuscripts getting through this first screen are then sent to our external

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reviewers for their assessment. On receipt of their reports, the editor then makes a decision on the future of each paper. For many papers, the reviewers make helpful suggestions and the authors are asked to revise their manuscripts. The system is well established and at APJPH we have a group of expert reviewers who assess all of our papers. It is a good system that is working well. But there are always possibilities for improvement.

We should encourage more debate postpublication. We already publish “letters to the editor,” but these are limited because of space constraints and take some time before they appear. In this information age we will consider moving to online discussions of recently published articles. And perhaps it will not stop there. We now receive many more papers than we can ever publish, and many are available on our Web site in “preprint format” months before they appear in print. Perhaps we can offer the opportunity to comment before print publication. To accommodate the large number of manuscripts being rejected we may have to consider accepting papers that are only published online, as is now being done by other journals. But this is for the future.

The process of reviewing has been reviewed by the UK parliament and generally the system has passed and has been recommended as the best available. But the committee raised some interesting points, including the risk of putting too much emphasis on citations and publication for promotion and assessment of academic status. Overall they concluded,

Peer review in scholarly publishing, in one form or another, is crucial to the reputation and reliability of scientific research . . . editorial peer review is considered by many as important and not something that can be dispensed with.1(p88)

In this month’s issue of APJPH we bring another selection of articles related to important public health issues in our region. The topics cover a variety of public health issues that are relevant to our region. Reflecting the importance of chronic disease in our region several of the papers deal with important risk factors. One difficulty for the journal is the lack of agreement on how to measure risk factors and this is reflected, for example, in different measures of obesity that are used in our journal. Other topics in this issue deal with equity of access to health services, an important issue for advancing health for all. The article from Korea illustrates the value of having long-term cohort studies that can be used to assess risk factors for chronic disease.

These articles illustrate the diversity of topics that contribute to public health in our region. We are grateful to the reviewers who have made available their time and expertise during 2011. We thank you for your contribution to our journal and to public health. We know that you will continue to assist us in 2012 in our mission of promoting scientific knowledge to advance health for all in our region.

Reference