

The peer review process in health journals

Article evaluation by scientific journals in the health field has enjoyed a vigorous debate in recent years. Various topics have been discussed in scientific congresses and articles. Among the main issues, the peer review process has clearly been the object of controversy and differences of opinion as to the most appropriate method for evaluating article submissions.

This trend was confirmed at the 6th International Congress on Peer Review and Biomedical Publication (<http://www.ama-assn.org/public/peer/peerhome.htm>), held this year in Vancouver, Canada. Although organized and mainly represented by editors from English-speaking countries, the congress raised relevant questions for authors and journals from elsewhere in the world.

Importantly, the international editorial community acknowledged the quantitative and qualitative expansion of health journals published in Latin America and Asia. In addition, various editors have searched for ways to promote the journals' editorial development, for example through the debate forum of the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME; <http://www.wame.org/>).

Another important issue was the recognition that there is still no real internationalization of the leading biomedical journals, like JAMA, NEJM, Lancet, and BMJ, given that at least 90% of the articles they publish are signed by authors affiliated with institutions located in Europe, the United States, and Canada.

The central focus of the congress was the discussion of controversial issues and the presentation of research results on the peer review process. For journals with a higher impact factor, the peer review process has been considered adequate. In other words, independent reviewers generally tend to evaluate articles consistently, which, according to the editors, has ensured the quality of published articles. The most interesting findings presented at the congress include the following: (a) studies that fail to find statistical associations do not necessarily take longer to be published (contrary to widespread belief); (b) reviewers' experience does not lead to better evaluation of the manuscripts; and (c) publication of industry-funded studies does not negatively affect readers' assessment of the respective journals.

However, the congress identified some persistent limitations in the peer review process. The majority of published studies lack good validity and fail to raise new issues for science. In addition, the articles included in the leading medical journals in recent years will have little impact in terms of improving people's health care.

Despite such limitations, the peer review process is viewed as an essential stage in the evaluation of scientific articles. Mechanisms to ensure the quality of peer review and agility in the editorial process still pose challenges for many scientific journals, especially in Latin America, due to the reviewers' lack of response or delay in responding, as well as the inconsistency between the reviews signed by different consultants for the same manuscript. The quality of the editorial process is expected to be sustained by peer review's legitimacy and credibility. Especially in Public Health, new evidence from research published in our journals is expected to help improve health services and the population's quality of life.

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