The buck stops here

The editorial process at *Nature Chemistry* differs in some important ways from that employed at other chemistry journals.

Members of the editorial team here at *Nature Chemistry* are often invited to give talks in university departments and at conferences to offer our insight into the publishing process. Usually we are asked to describe the inner workings of this journal, or to explain what is viewed as an alternative career path for scientists, but occasionally our hosts seek more philosophical discussions on scientific publishing in general, and how it may (or may not) be evolving.

These events are particularly useful from our perspective because they enable our authors, referees and readers to give us direct feedback — and as we embark on volume 2 of *Nature Chemistry*, we are eager to hear what the community has to say. These talks also provide us with the opportunity to explain what sets us apart from other chemistry journals in terms of the editorial process, because there are subtle — yet important — differences.

Many chemistry journals have editorial boards and/or advisory boards, generally made up of individuals from academic and industrial laboratories. Depending on the journal in question, the role of the members of these boards varies. This can range from the day-to-day handling of manuscripts, to a more hands-off involvement in the peer-review process (such as dealing with less routine situations including tricky decisions and appeals), through to more strategic input based on advice concerning the direction and development of a journal.

One of the most common questions we encounter on our travels (and also occasionally while sitting in the office) is 'who is on your editorial board?' And, of course, the variations on this theme of: 'can I be on your editorial board?' and 'I would like to appeal this decision [to reject my manuscript] to your editorial board'. As with all of the Nature research journals, however, *Nature Chemistry* has neither an editorial board nor an advisory board. All decisions are taken by the editorial team, which comprises five PhD-trained chemists who have all had experience of working at other chemistry publishers[1].

Although we do rely on referees to highlight technical concerns or intrinsic scientific problems with a given piece of work, the decision about whether a particular manuscript will appeal to a broad readership of researchers in the chemistry

Editors at *Nature Chemistry* often have to weigh up conflicting opinions from referees to make the final decision about whether to accept a manuscript for publication or not.

community is made by the editorial team. A referee is undoubtedly going to be an expert in the area relevant to a manuscript that we have asked them to evaluate, but each reviewer will only see a small fraction of our total submissions. The editorial team, on the other hand, are aware of all the manuscripts sent to us for consideration, and are able to judge an individual contribution in that wider context[2]. There are, of course, well-trodden arguments[3] both for and against active researchers making editorial decisions. Nevertheless, it seems that both models work and are accepted by the community.

Of course, as with all chemistry journals, the peer-review process has a crucial role in determining what articles are ultimately published in *Nature Chemistry*. Peer review is certainly not perfect and perhaps there are ways in which it can be improved[4], but it is generally acknowledged that it is the best system we have. We try to guide our referees by asking specific questions about some manuscripts, as well as giving general guidance about what we want from a referee report. One of the most important aspects is that referees should justify their comments and opinions about a given piece of work — a point neatly summed up in a *Nature Physics* editorial[5] as 'Whatever you think about a paper, it is vital to explain to us exactly why you think it.' This article serves as great advice to any referee and should be required reading for all *Nature Chemistry* referees!

One of the main goals of the peer-review process at any journal should be to have garnered enough information from the referees in order for the editor to make an informed decision about whether a paper should be published or not. The actual mechanics of how the system works at *Nature Chemistry*, however, is — in our experience — a little different from other chemistry journals. Not only do we endeavour to follow up with referees and let them know what decision we have ultimately made, but we also let each reviewer of a particular paper see what the other referees had to say about it (anonymously of course). Moreover, if the recommendation of a referee (whether positive or negative) has been overruled, we take the opportunity at this point to explain why we felt it was necessary to do that. This notification process is repeated when we ask referees to evaluate revised manuscripts.

All of the feedback we have received about this policy is very positive — it is unsurprising that referees appreciate knowing the fate of a manuscript they have spent time evaluating, and they are usually intrigued by the comments of the other referees. Younger academics, who are perhaps not as experienced as some older referees, have commented that seeing the other reports on a manuscript they have reviewed can be quite instructive. After all, nobody is given formal training in how to write a referee report. Occasionally this process also acts as an internal check for us — it has been known for a referee to point out errors in one of the other reports.

At face value, *Nature Chemistry* publishes research articles just as other chemistry journals do — but there are important differences to be found if you drill down into the details. Even though the professional editorial team does have the final say, we strive to keep our referees in the loop at every stage. ❐

References

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