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## Can peer review survive?

Are the days for the traditional system of peer review for scientific journals numbered? How much longer can the current traditional methods last?

My reasons for asking the above questions are the result of our experiences here at the *BDJ* over recent months, but also conversations I have had with editors of scientific journals in other disciplines as well. It would seem there is a general problem finding referees who can provide quality reviews of papers in a reasonable time span. However, for the *BDJ* the situation became really obvious when we introduced our electronic manuscript tracking system last July. To use a rather hackneyed cliché - perhaps our electronic process has exposed a system that is starting to crack open at the seams!

For a start the digital technology behind the new manuscript tracking system has not been as smooth as we would like (or perhaps more significantly were promised). The new system has resulted in a delay in our ability to move manuscripts through the system as quickly as we had anticipated, and one of the problems has been the increase in the length of time referees are taking in responding with their reports. I had assumed that transacting manuscripts through the internet would speed up the refereeing process, but the reverse seems to be true (although there are early signs this is starting to change).

On average referees seem to be taking several weeks longer to return their reports, perhaps because an electronic manuscript does not physically sit on your desk or in your briefcase, reminding you of its presence. Instead it happily remains invisible unless you log onto the site, hidden from you until you choose to look for it.

The other problem, which in retrospect I should have anticipated, is the increase in the number of referees unable to actually referee because they are too busy. I have been in post 11 years now, and it has never been so hard to find referees who are able to sacrifice personal time for the benefit of their peers. Similarly I have never seen so many people refuse to referee a paper because they are so pressed for time. Many

papers are being held up for several months because the referees are saying they simply cannot cope at the moment. Naturally this is a major concern for the authors who must tuck more and more publications into their portfolios in order to receive career advancement. Perhaps it is even more of a concern for the dental institutions who need publications to attract future levels of funding.

I suspect also that my observations are possibly ahead of most other dental scientific journals because of the volume of papers that pass through the *BDJ*'s system. We publish twice a month, far more than most journals which at best tend to be monthly and often adopt a quarterly timetable. This results in far more papers moving through our system, both worsening the problem and exposing it.

Despite these observations I feel it is essential we retain both the spirit and the process of peer review. To forsake scientific refereeing is to open the doors to abuse and misinformation, and to be honest is unthinkable. Yet it would seem the traditional approach is becoming more and more untenable.

With this in mind at the *BDJ* we are beginning to look at alternative structures for peer review, retaining the spirit but rethinking the process. After all, the principles are simple enough. We must ensure that manuscripts submitted for publication are examined by those with knowledge and expertise sufficient to ensure that the scientific process is followed, the standards of scientific quality are upheld, and the authors are helped to make their manuscripts accurate, relevant and meaningful for the audience.

Finally, and more important than all I have written so far, peer review must be transparent to the readership so they know how it works, how effective it is and which papers have been reviewed. It is a challenging task in the current situation, but one we cannot run away from any longer.

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