

# Editorial

## To Mask or Not-To-Mask

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Since becoming the *Journal of Perinatology* editor, I have made several changes in the review process. The basic process of manuscript review remains unchanged. As this process consumes significant time, we are attempting to hasten the review process. In addition to asking reviewers to respond quickly, we are exploring ways to utilize faster communications than the postal system. Currently many referees are returning reviews to the editorial office using facsimile transmittals (fax). We are developing automated ways for choosing and communicating with our external reviewers. Later this year, Nature Publishing Group expects to equip the editorial offices of their Specialty Journals Division with a fully automated web-based system for manuscript submission, review, and transmittal to the publisher for typesetting. These changes will significantly reduce time from article receipt to its print publication.

The major new change is discontinuing masking of reviewers from the identity of authors and institutions where a manuscript originated. By tradition, the *Journal* editorial staff have masked articles by changing the title page of each manuscript before sending it to the reviewers. Since discontinuing the masking process, reviewers have commented both positively and negatively to this change.

Masking is used by approximately 20% of all journals in their respective manuscript review procedures. The purpose of masking is to develop a degree of anonymity in the review process. A frequent explanation is that masking protects against bias for or against a manuscript based upon authorship or institutional prestige and results in improved quality of the reviews. Numerous editorials<sup>1,2</sup> discussing this are available in the literature, but data regarding this assumption are only recently available. Since 1989, editors of numerous medical research journals have met three times, as the International Congress on Peer Review in Biomedical Publication, to study aspects of the editorial process, including peer review. During the meetings several papers addressed the question of masking manuscripts for peer review.

Common issues reported with masking were: (1) inadequate or incomplete ability to effectively mask the articles despite extensive alteration of the manuscript text and removal of any

obvious self-references,<sup>3,4</sup> (2) marginal or no clear improvement in the quality of reviews,<sup>5-7</sup> and (3) no effect on identifying errors introduced into manuscripts.<sup>8</sup> I conclude that masking does not improve the review process, results in processing delays and has associated costs. Therefore, we have discontinued this practice.

Anonymity of reviewers is another aspect of the review process that has been controversial. With anonymous peer review, the reviewer is not identified to the authors. This process has been considered both positively and negatively. The lack of accountability associated with anonymous reviewers may result in lower quality of reviews and decreased civility of the reviews. In a letter to the editor, one prospective author felt that reviewers could reject papers without assuming responsibility.<sup>9</sup> Another view is that as long as the reviewers are anonymous then masking them to the authors would not necessarily improve the quality of their reviews.<sup>1</sup> One paper in the psychiatric literature supports revealing reviewers' identities to authors,<sup>10</sup> whereas other papers have not demonstrated a positive effect of the reviewers signing their reviews.<sup>7,8</sup> Though randomized, these studies were not blinded and perhaps may have been biased as one showed that manuscripts recommended for publication were more likely to be signed by the reviewers. In allowing reviewers to sign their reviews, should they wish, the *Journal of Perinatology* has historically taken no stance on whether reviews should be anonymous. Most reviewers, however, choose to remain anonymous and do not sign their reviews.

At present, we are evaluating manuscripts utilizing the following procedures. The scientific merit of all manuscripts is initially considered by an editor. On passing this initial review, appropriate reviewers are chosen from those suggested by the author and from our own panel of external reviewers. We attempt to have two completed reviews for each manuscript. Upon return of the reviews, each manuscript is reevaluated by the original editor and the reviews are considered in context with the manuscript. Reviews may have similar or disparate evaluations. Disparate recommendations will be resolved either by the editor or editor-in-chief by requesting new reviews or by sending the manuscript back to the authors with comments by all readers. The editors will always read the manuscript and balance the reviewers' and their own perceived concepts regarding the scientific value of the manuscript with our publication priorities, possible similar articles, and other intangible factors. I wish to assure all authors that by using this system, each article will receive fair, individual consideration. The editors of the *Journal* will be very active in selecting articles with the advice of our external

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reviewers, yet we will occasionally override reviewers' recommendations, both for and against publication. With this process, the external reviewers give advice to the editors, but the editors make the final decisions regarding each manuscript. Therefore, although the editors' advisors may remain anonymous, the decision-maker is certainly not anonymous.

Major criteria for manuscript publication remain assessment of scientific originality, innovation, appropriate methods, and apparent significance to the clinical practice of our readership. Other criteria will include writing accuracy and style, quality of figures, manuscript length, and breadth of interest to our subscribers. In addition to regular articles, we encourage reviews and commentaries. Letters to the editor regarding prior articles will be considered by the editor and authors of the related article. I look forward to reading your contributions.

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