

## EDITORIAL

Next steps in reforming the *PCRJ's* peer review process

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At the beginning of this year we set out our plans for further development of the *PCRJ*.<sup>1</sup> Fundamental to this was a series of changes to maximise the potential of peer review and to make it more efficient. Peer review remains the essential hallmark of a journal of record, but if it is not fair, effective and appropriately managed it is liable to abuse and even has the potential to stifle genuine scientific innovation.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, over the past year we have instituted the first phase of reform of the *PCRJ's* peer review process. All paper submissions are now reviewed by both Editors-in-Chief during our weekly editorial meeting and an initial decision is made on whether or not to send the paper out for peer review. If we are unsure, cannot agree, or one of us has a conflict of interest in relation to the paper, we call on one of our two Assistant Editors, Professors Chris Griffiths and Onno van Schayck, to provide us with a second opinion. Currently, about 40% of manuscript submissions are rejected at this point. Those papers selected for peer review are then allocated to one of our Associate Editors who handles the paper, provides a further expert opinion, and co-ordinates international peer review. We seek the best possible peer reviewers worldwide to provide us with expert advice so we can improve those papers we are interested in pursuing. Finally, once a paper has been accepted for publication, more often than not we will commission an editorial or commentary from international experts in that particular field, thus contextualising the article for readers.

These changes – undertaken with the support of our dedicated team of Associate Editors and scholars from across the world – have helped us reduce dramatically the average time to initial decision (currently 20 days) and final decision (34 days) on papers submitted to the *PCRJ*; the journal statistics are updated regularly and are available on the *PCRJ* website – see [journal statistics](#) for more information. The changes have also improved the quality of published papers, increased the number of editorials and commentaries in each issue, and consequently we hope have enhanced the relevance of this research to our respiratory-interested worldwide readership.

After discussion with our Assistant and Associate Editors, our International Editorial Board, and fellow Respiratory Journal Editors internationally – to whom we are extremely grateful for their comments and willingness to share their experience – we now embark on the second phase of reform of the *PCRJ's* peer review process. We are instituting a number of major changes to facilitate the value and transparency of peer review and to give greater credit to those who selflessly provide this service to the scientific community.

Firstly, we are ending the double-blind peer review process which the *PCRJ* has had in place since its inception. Although double-blind review was historically (and almost universally) considered to be important,<sup>3</sup> many leading journals have in recent years moved to a more open review process.<sup>4</sup> It is now recognised that attempts at trying to blind the identity of authors from reviewers are largely unsuccessful, and hence the additional work for authors in attempting to anonymise their manuscripts is of little or no benefit. Therefore, henceforth we will have either single-blind or open peer review, and authors will no longer be required to anonymise their manuscripts.

This change does in some cases carry a small, but nonetheless important, risk of introducing bias into the peer review process:<sup>5</sup> to minimise this we will allow authors not only to suggest reviewers to referee their work, but also permit them to highlight non-preferred reviewers, making it clear why they do not wish their papers to be sent to such

individuals. Our editors will take this information into consideration when deciding on peer review of their manuscripts.

Secondly, we are keen eventually to move to an open peer review process, and would therefore prefer it if reviewers declared themselves to authors and signed their reviews. This will have the advantage of allowing authors of accepted manuscripts to acknowledge (if they feel it is appropriate) those colleagues who have reviewed their work and helped them improve the paper – and such acknowledgements are now to be actively encouraged. However, we are not insisting on open peer review. This is because we understand that some reviewers may on occasions wish to remain anonymous: concerns have, for example, been expressed that junior researchers may feel intimidated in reviewing openly the work of more senior colleagues,<sup>6</sup> and others have concerns about the composition of reviews undertaken by those whose first language is not English.<sup>7</sup>

Overall, both authors and readers should feel reassured that this move towards open peer review will not adversely impact on the quality of peer review.<sup>8</sup>

Thirdly, our Handling Editors put in a great deal of work to help us select and improve papers and we feel it is only right that they are duly acknowledged for their efforts; from now on the identity of the Handling Editor will be given at the end of all published research and clinical review articles.

And finally, all quantitative papers will now undergo a formal statistical review from our Statistics Editor, Dr Gopal Netuveli, prior

to acceptance for publication – and this too will be made clear at the foot of the manuscript.

Scholarship is ultimately a collaborative endeavour and we hope that these changes make clear our desire to have a transparent, effective and efficient *PCRJ* peer review process which recognises the essential contribution of our fellow editors and peer reviewers.

## References

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