Let's go swimming

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We recently came across a fascinating editorial by Bell and Kvajo [1], the title of which begins “Tackling waste in publishing...”. It didn’t take more than that to pique our curiosity. Turns out it wasn’t a treatise on shady practices, such as publishing the least amount one could get away with, or a repetitive science [me too] paper, or even a manuscript without statistical support; these are topics we and many others have written about previously [2, 3]. Rather, it was about improving the peer review process in their journal, *BMC Biology*, by formalizing a strategy referred to as “portable peer review”. Although there have been several variations on the theme as to the mechanics, in its simplest iteration, it allows reviews obtained previously to move with manuscripts to a new journal. Presumably, this will work best for manuscripts that were rejected for priority or space concerns rather than for quality. The more we read and thought about it, the better we liked the editorial’s proposal, because we are acutely aware of the amount of wasted effort in the peer review process.

It is no secret that it is common for manuscripts to make the rounds through two or more journals before publication. An author survey by *Epidemiology* revealed that 62% of papers accepted by this journal had previously been rejected by other journals [4]. Several recent studies on the fate of manuscripts rejected by biomedical journals showed that the proportion of manuscripts that were eventually published elsewhere ranged from 50 to 76% [5–10].

Our own experience is that 82% of manuscripts rejected by *Laboratory Investigation* (LI) were eventually published in

other journals. We also discovered that, of the manuscripts rejected after peer review, 40% had not incorporated any of our recommended changes before publication.

Thus, beginning immediately, LI will adopt a portable peer review policy, free to authors, under the following conditions:

(1) Should a manuscript submitted to LI be rejected, the corresponding author of the submission will be offered the chance to transfer those reviews to any journal of their choosing, irrespective of the publisher.

(2) If they elect to utilize that service, we will transfer to the editorial office of the new journal the reviews in our possession, including those of our editorial interns (while maintaining reviewer confidentiality) [11]. We’ll even do it a second time, if necessary.

(3) Authors can, in turn, request that we review a paper previously rejected elsewhere and inform us what journal they previously submitted to, and we will reach out to the editors and ask them to forward their reviews to us. Naturally, we can’t compel them to share those reviews but, hopefully, most will be agreeable.

We believe that this will make life easier for the authors, who often spend many months to years gathering data they believe worthy of transmission to their colleagues in the research community, and don’t want to spend a comparable amount of time waiting to see the final product published.

It will clearly benefit us in our never-ending search for qualified reviewers, who are themselves under increased pressure to review more manuscripts ever more rapidly, and we believe it may improve our turn-around time from submission to publication. It’s a win–win–win for all involved.

It’s not yet summer in North America but it’s time to jump into the pool, get wet, and start swimming.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest Catherine M Ketcham is the Managing Editor of *Laboratory Investigation* and an employee of Ketcham Solutions Inc., which receives payment from the United States and Canadian Academy of Pathology for journal management.

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