From the editor's desk

What happens to a manuscript after submission? How does the editor reach a decision? What is the editor's role during peer review? We take a look into the editorial process at *Nature Cancer*.

One of the questions we are asked most frequently is how editors assess the manuscripts submitted to our journal to decide whether to peer review and eventually publish them. Even though prospective authors can learn about peer review and publication at our journal from the dedicated page of [our website](#), here we provide deeper insight into the role of the editor in this process.

Nature Cancer editors are responsible for different areas of cancer research covered by the journal's [broad scope](#). This allows each editor to continuously sharpen their knowledge in their specific fields by keeping up to date with the latest advances through the literature, conference attendance and frequent interactions with specific research communities. When a manuscript is submitted to the journal, the Chief Editor assigns it to the most appropriate editor on the basis of the specific areas for which they are responsible. This ensures that manuscripts benefit from the relevant editorial expertise and from consistency in the editorial decision-making process. However, *Nature Cancer* editors do not make decisions in a vacuum. Instead, the handling editor of the manuscript assesses it in detail and discusses it with the editorial team, typically with at least one other colleague, but frequently with more, including with the Chief Editor for all major editorial decisions. Among the editorial considerations in deciding whether to send a manuscript for formal peer review are the level of advance it represents in light of the published literature, whether the dataset is sufficiently developed to support the main conclusions, the translational and clinical relevance of the reported findings and whether they would be of interest to the journal's broad audience of cancer researchers. Given that *Nature Cancer* covers the breadth of the cancer field from preclinical to translational and clinical research, depending on their specific area, different manuscripts provide different types of an advance—for instance, mechanistic, technical, translational or clinical—and could be developed to a different level of experimental and analytical depth, employing a wide variety of methodologies, models and datasets. *Nature Cancer* editors evaluate each study on its own merits, taking such considerations into account and aiming for consistency and fairness in their decisions.

When a manuscript is sent for peer review, the handling editor communicates with the authors about the editorial decision, relevant journal policies and additional information required to proceed, and selects the referees for the study. Our main consideration for this crucial step of the process is to engage referees whose expertise can cover all major aspects of the manuscript, but who will also provide constructive comments in a timely manner. *Nature Cancer* papers typically have two to four referees, depending on how focused or expansive a study is conceptually and technically, with the majority of papers being reviewed by three experts. Authors are welcome to provide suggestions for potential referees, although we are not obliged to use them, and may also exclude up to three researchers from the peer-review process, a request that we are committed to honoring. Referee anonymity is guaranteed throughout the peer-review and publication process, unless referees decide to sign their remarks to the authors or to be acknowledged in the final published version of the manuscript (a note our readers can find in the 'Additional information' section of all *Nature Cancer* papers). Authors may also remain anonymous to the referees by opting into double-blind peer review when they submit their manuscripts. In such cases, the editors will refrain from transmitting author names to referees during the peer review, but the authors themselves are responsible for ensuring that their manuscript files are made fully anonymous.

The handling editor provides guidance to the referees on the points they should consider when reviewing the manuscript, such as the relevant published literature, the robustness of the data presented, the degree to which they support the relevant conclusions, and experiments that could strengthen or expand the study. Once all referee reports have been returned, the handling editor assesses them in detail and discusses them with the editorial team, including the Chief Editor, to determine whether the manuscript warrants further consideration at our journal. At this stage, we critically evaluate the comments of the referees in light of their specific expertise, the main focus of the manuscript and the journal's and field's standards for the particular topic. In cases for which we invite

a revision, we synthesize the referee points to provide authors with a list of priorities that they must address for their paper to be considered further, and wherever applicable, a list of requests that we are overruling—for instance, those we deem as not essential for the main message of the paper. These editorially compiled prioritized and overruled points are also transmitted to the referees, so that all parties are aware of where the editor has set the bar for considering a revised version. When inviting a revision, the handling editor also ensures that the authors are aware of recommended revision timeframes, journal policies and additional information and documents they must provide on resubmission.

When a revision is submitted, the handling editor assesses it in detail to determine whether the revisions warrant re-review, in which case the paper is sent back to the original referees. A core policy of the *Nature* journals is that acceptance to review a manuscript equals acceptance to review all its subsequent versions, as this helps ensure a fair process without shifting of expectations in different rounds of review. If an original referee is not available, we engage another researcher with similar expertise and guide them on the specific points they should assess. When reviewing revisions, we ask that referees avoid raising new points on data that had been reviewed previously, and we editorially overrule on any such issues raised, unless they pertain to a truly crucial aspect of the study that would be problematic unless addressed. Once a manuscript has been revised to a degree deemed satisfactory by referees and editors, the handling editor offers publication of the study and guides the authors through the final revisions needed to comply with editorial considerations, such as those pertaining to formatting and policy.

When declining a manuscript before or after peer review, *Nature Cancer* editors provide a rationale for our negative decision. In cases in which authors disagree, we are open to considering their arguments and, if needed, to revisit our decisions. However, as we strive to reach well-considered and justified decisions, we generally uphold them, unless new information strongly makes the case for reconsidering—for instance, by indicating an erroneous assessment by editors or referees on a

key point, or by providing new data that address previously raised shortcomings. Where appropriate, the handling editor of a declined manuscript may provide options for accelerated publication elsewhere—for example, by recommending [transfer of the manuscript](#) to a particular sister title that publishes relevant research and with whose editorial standards we are familiar. In cases where authors have given us permission to discuss the paper with other Nature journals and we feel confident that it would interest a specific journal, we may consult with our colleagues at that journal to determine whether and under what conditions they would invite a transfer of the manuscript. Although *Nature Cancer* editors may make transfer recommendations, each Nature journal reaches its own independent decisions and, ultimately, whether, when and to which journal to transfer their manuscript is entirely up to the authors. However,

the transfer process can be beneficial, as it applies to manuscripts declined before or after peer review, does not require reformatting (but provides authors with the option to amend files if they wish to) and involves the transfer of the full referee reports and identities, thus permitting the receiving journal to reach a decision on the basis of the existing peer-review history and by engaging the original referees as needed.

From submission to the final decision, the handling editor is the person at the journal who is closest to the manuscript. This goes far beyond reading the manuscript and sending standard emails about peer-review requests and decisions, but instead involves in-depth discussions about the manuscript, referee reports and revisions within the editorial team, with authors and with referees (and, when conflicting opinions require it, also with arbitrators) at all stages of the process. Rather than being a passive

filter that simply facilitates author–referee interactions, the handling editor of a *Nature Cancer* manuscript is the communicator who champions the study for possible publication, actively converses with referees about its strengths and shortcomings and discusses with authors about whether and how these can be addressed. As *Nature Cancer* editors, our main concern is to provide a thoughtful, fair and informed peer-review and editorial process and to publish cancer research of the highest quality that is impactful for the field and, ultimately, for patients. As we strive to maintain these high standards and to continue to improve, we welcome the suggestions and comments of our authors, referees and readers at cancer@nature.com.

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