



The editorial process in medical journals: reconciling different perspectives

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In connection with the Letter to the Editor published in this issue of *Revista Colombiana de Obstetricia y Ginecología* (RCOG) regarding the impressions created in the authors by the editorial process of a scientific journal, I would like to express my thoughts regarding the different perspectives from which the editorial process is approached: those of the authors, the editors and the audience. The first two stakeholders have their own roles and responsibilities within the editorial process itself, while the audience is the recipient and user of the end product. Consequently, I will try to summarize our editorial process to provide a better understanding of the role of the three groups, the aim being to further our joint work towards a result that will satisfy all the parties involved and the end RCOG users.

Let us begin by defining who are the participants in the editorial process and what their roles are, as well as who our audience is and what it expects from us.

According to the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), an author is the individual who makes a substantial contribution to the design, conduct and analysis of a research study, or the drafting and approval of the final manuscript, and is accountable for the validity and integrity of the results of the study (1).

In his book on how to edit a scientific journal, Bishop points out that the editor is the individual responsible for deciding which manuscripts are published, and for making sure that those papers meet

the required scientific quality, ethical and editorial standards. The editor also acts sometimes as arbitrator and also as advisor to the authors (2).

As far as the audience is concerned, the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE) defines it as “the number of people who receive a message through any communication medium” (3). Audiences can be on-site or off-site. The former consists of individuals who gather to attend a lecture, and the latter consists of readers. Readers are different in that there is no immediate conversation between a speaker and a listener (4). In the case of scientific literature, readers are often skeptical and critical (5). Moreover, readers can be divided into two categories: information consumers, be them clinicians, administrators, policy-makers or others, who need to expand their knowledge of a specific issue or want to find novel introductions to their practice or specialty; and researchers, who look for information pertaining to a question that has already been defined or is under construction. They are the only stakeholders who have no responsibility in the editorial process, although they do have expectations.

Having defined the parties to the production and consumption of scientific publications, I will now describe the roles and responsibilities of the participants in the editorial process.

Authors are accountable for the content of the manuscript, a job that requires planning, organization and use of the appropriate language (6). Likewise, they must recognize the people who have earned authorship rights in accordance with explicit criteria, and reach agreement regarding authorship order

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before submitting the manuscript to the journal (7). Moreover, they are responsible for avoiding gift authorship or ghost authorship (8), for the transparent reporting of the activities conducted by each author within the framework of the study, determining who is the corresponding author and, finally, expressing acknowledgments to those concerned (1). Authors must also send a reply in writing to the comments of the peer reviewers or of the editorial committee, either to accept the suggestions or observations and make the relevant changes, or to dispute them in case they disagree. Specifically, they must comply with the requirements of the journal to which they are submitting their manuscript, including scientific publication verification and text format. For all this to happen, a checklist is usually provided to help authors make sure that all the documents are complete. Up to 50% of the manuscripts submitted to our journal fail to enter the editorial process because inadequate checklist completion (see: <https://revista.fecolsog.org/index.php/rcog/libraryFiles/downloadPublic/145>)

Expectations: Authors expect that the journal will comply with all the scientific integrity criteria and best editorial quality and transparency practices, for the benefit of the publishing researchers and society at large. That is to say, they expect it to not be a predatory journal (9). They expect prompt response to their submission and also to be informed of clear and fair reasons for not accepting the manuscript, should that be the case. Authors expect, in good faith, that the quality they attach to their work is recognized by peer reviewers and the audience, so that their material is accepted with no changes or just minor ones. Moreover, particularly in our setting, they expect their publishing record and academic titles to be considered, and not be subject to space limitations. Many times, the latter cannot be met, as will be described later on.

Editors are responsible for reviewing all the submitted manuscripts that are in compliance with the checklist, as the initial step in the process. They assign peer reviewers and act as intermediaries

between the authors and the reviewers. Theirs is the final judgement on whether the article is accepted, acceptable or rejected. If the decision is the latter - not accepted - it must be communicated as soon as possible. Editors must ensure the confidentiality of the information contained in the manuscripts submitted to the journal during the entire process, and must ensure that the editorial process is trustworthy, clear and timely. They will seek to be inclusive as relates to the topics presented to the readers and the metrics reported to the authors (1).

Manuscripts should be selected on the basis of their originality, the relevance of the topic for the journal's readers, as well as the validity, precision and quality of the report. In selecting studies for publication, neither financial, political or friendship reasons nor the types of results obtained (absence of statistical significance) should influence the decision (1).

Expectations: Authors are expected to understand that submission of their papers to the journal is a request that is part of many others that must be submitted to the editorial process. They are also expected to comply with the scientific integrity standards, including ethical values, before, during and after the research process; to report real and valid data; to avoid plagiarism and to recognize contributions from other researchers; to inform the editors if the data or the article have been presented previously in a congress or as a preprint, or if they have been submitted to another journal; to disclose their conflicts of interest (10); do their best to communicate their work in a substantive (11) and effective (12), writing for the readers and not for themselves. Authors are also expected to reply promptly to the peer reviewers, either to accept or to reject their comments, in case they disagree; to be resilient, that is to say, to have the ability to adapt to initial or definitive negative results regarding what they expect from the assessment of the submitted paper, including the comments made by the editorial committee regarding the form or the content of the manuscript, after the response of the peer reviewers is received.

Readers expect to be able to trust what is published in the journal and that the papers contain relevant, valid, clear, easy-to-read information, which is not repeated. Moreover, they expect that their observations regarding the content of the journal (letters to the editor) are taken into account; that there is editorial independence and academic freedom, understood as the researchers' right to publish, regardless of the prevailing opinion or institutional preferences, and the freedom to express a critical opinion regarding the institutions where they work, and regarding public matters in general (13).

Finally, we would like to explain the steps involved in the editorial process so authors can have a better understanding of the delays that may hinder the smooth progress of a paper in a scientific journal in a region affected by limited resources, less local recognition and inequality conditions when compared with journals of the international scientific publishing industry (14).

These steps are the following: 1) Verifying compliance with the check-list; 2) initial review of the article by the editorial committee to determine whether it is consistent with the journals' focus and scope; 3) assigning papers considered relevant to review by peers; 4) the editorial committee receives the answers from the peer reviewers and compiles and forwards the comments to the authors; 5) reply from the authors to the comments of the peer reviewers; 6) the manuscript with the changes, together with the authors' letter replying to the comments of the peer reviewers and containing an explanation of the changes made or not made, is received, and this reply is analyzed (optional); 7) editors send their comments or suggestions, aimed at improving the clarity of the text; 8) the manuscript is again submitted, with or without acceptance of the suggestions, and solving the editors' comments (this process may not be required or, on the contrary, it may repeat itself several times until the expected quality is attained); 9) the paper is sent to proofreading; 10) authors conduct a careful review of the paper with the changes suggested

by the proofreader, and accept or reject them; 11) manuscript layout; 13) the authors and the editor review the manuscript layout; 14) publication.

In view of the above, complying with the process responsibly and in a timely manner with the input of all the parties involved in order to obtain the best possible result in terms of quality could require at least 13 weeks. Hence the need for understanding, support and commitment to teamwork for the benefit of our researchers who are often victims of the so-called "institutional racism," a problem which has prompted complaints from editors of high impact journals (15). This will be of benefit for our population, considering that observations conducted in high income countries, or published in English not always applicable to our context and might not benefit our healthcare workers and, consequently, our population (14). As far as we are concerned, we commit to do our best to reduce the time cycles that are under our control, for the good of our audience.

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