EDITOR'S NOTE

The Nature of the Editorial

Editorials are, by definition, opinions on topical issues. Journal articles sometimes need them, but often not. Informative titles help readers decide if abstracts are worth reading, and informative abstracts do the same for the full piece. Well-developed articles may stand firmly on their own, delivering appropriate content with clarity and balance.

A recent comment pointed out that the editorials in this journal espouse standards that are not always met by the articles within the pages. That is true, and for good reason. Editorials are often aspirational or educational. They can promote best practice even when it is hard to achieve.

Many who read or submit manuscripts to this and other medical journals are not primarily trained in research or research communication. The peer review and revision process can play an important role in helping authors refine their skills.

There are issues that threaten the integrity of peer review. Several have been discussed in this space in recent years, many related, directly or indirectly, to the rise of predatory journals that will publish anything for a price. Societally, we need to promote critical thinking and reading skills both to aid in the intake and assessment of information and to demand high levels of credibility from sources. The structure of scientific writing can help readers navigate. It is easier to see what is missing when expectations exist that can rise above enthusiasm or bombast.

We need to be more active in training our authors, reviewers, and editors on best practice. Bias can never be eliminated, but it can be controlled. The limitations section of reports is one of the best places to see if authors have objectively developed their work. This will be evident in what is included, what is lacking, and how interpretations and conclusions are tempered. The limitations text should not be viewed as a fundamental weakness in a scientific report, but as a fundamental strength.

Peer review should start with no assumptions about the propriety of a manuscript being accepted, revised, or rejected. Author and institution names are given more weight than they deserve by some. It is really only the content of a report that matters. There is a necessary reliance on the good faith efforts of researchers and authors to deliver valid content, but outcome decisions must be based on a careful evaluation of what is presented in every section and the logic, clarity, and temperance in crafting and interpretations.

There are ongoing debates over the strengths of fully unblinded, author blinded, reviewer blinded, and fully blinded peer review. There are arguments for and against each that will not be resolved here. The critical point for me is that every review should be written as though it is unblinded. As social media has made clear, anonymity can breed a lack of civility that does not aid in promoting thoughtful exchange. Relentless diplomacy should be the fundamental goal, with a healthy dose of forgiveness for those who suffer from inevitable lapses.

Scientific thought advances as experience and understanding evolve. Insight and opinion influence manuscripts and the reviews of them. The plan is to get things right, but it is also important to appreciate that incorrect reports can still play an important role if they drive others to look further into questions. The problem to avoid is publishing reports that are invalid at the point of inception. Open communication helps to make this possible.

Credible peer reviewed journals have both power and responsibility in developing and protecting the literature record. Sensitivity to concerns is often aided by simple conversations. Editorials are one of the tools used to encourage them.

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