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Cover Picture:
Ephraim McDowell (1771-1830):
pioneer of ovariectomy.
(Refer to pages 4-5)

Reviewing for the Singapore Medical Journal

W C G Peh

As editor of the Singapore Medical Journal (SMJ), one of my duties is the assignment of manuscripts to expert reviewers. Every manuscript submitted to SMJ undergoes peer-review, without exception. Two reviewers per manuscript is the norm, although when required, three or more reviewers may be involved. While the vast majority of our reviewers are medical practitioners based in Singapore, we also have scientists and paramedical experts, such as nutritionists, nurses and occupational therapists, on our review panel. When warranted, manuscripts may be sent to our overseas reviewers.

Peer review is crucial to the success of any scientific publication, including SMJ, as it helps ensure scientific quality and accuracy. While the editor is heavily dependent on the reports of the reviewers tasked to assess these manuscripts, it should be emphasised that these reports should be regarded as representing a guide for the editor. They exert a strong influence on the editor's decisions regarding the fate of the manuscript but do not solely dictate the editor's course of action.

Editorial decisions are based not only upon reviewers' reports and confidential comments to the editor, but also the editor's own reading of the manuscript, journal policy, the flow of manuscripts to the journal, and constraints imposed by the size of the journal. The editor aims to publish a balanced selection of articles that fulfil the scientific and educational objectives of the journal, and that will appeal to as many readers of SMJ as possible. These articles are ideally up-to-date, of high scientific or educational quality, and are composed in good and readable English.

For authors, knowledge about the review process is helpful prior to and during manuscript preparation. The authors should try to understand the role of the reviewer and the components of a manuscript review. Manuscript deficiencies may be prospectively corrected if the author is aware of how the reviewer will assess the submitted manuscript.

The reviewer is an expert in his or her field who renders an unbiased opinion on the quality, timeliness and relevance of a submitted manuscript. SMJ appoints reviewers who either possess a specialist qualification or are well-regarded by peers in a particular field of practice. The reviewer is often a senior and experienced practitioner or academic, but not always necessarily so. From my experience, many younger doctors of registrar and associate consultant level make excellent reviewers. The reviewer has a responsibility to protect the integrity of his or her speciality or subspecialty or area of practice, the reputation of the scientific journal he or she is reviewing for, and the welfare of human and animal subjects.

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The reviewer should, in the process of reviewing, also aim to try to make the manuscript better, regardless of whether or not it will eventually be accepted for publication in SMJ. All manuscripts submitted to SMJ are blinded to the best of the editorial office's ability, prior to receipt by the reviewer. If the reviewer recognises some aspect of the origin of the manuscript e.g. author or institution, he or she is not normally disqualified from reviewing but he or she is obliged make this known to the editor.

The reviewer should be familiar with the various types of papers, instructions to authors, and in-house style of SMJ, and make sure that the author adheres to them. It is recommended that the reviewer begins the review by initially scanning through the manuscript, in order to get a feel and understanding of the message that author is trying to convey. This is usually followed by several re-reads, after which many reviewers do a brief summary of the manuscript, and tabulate an overall analysis under the major headings of strengths and weaknesses. General comments, e.g. readability and overall importance or relevance of the submitted manuscript, are also made.

The reviewer should then dissect the manuscript sequentially, systematically and in detail, making more specific comments. These usually comprise comments for each of the following sections: title, abstract, introduction, methods, results, discussion, references, tables and illustrations. These comments are best organised in point form, for clarity and ease of reference for both the editor and author. If the material is complex, a conscientious reviewer often does a re-read after a few days, prior to submission of his report.

The ideal review should be objective, concise and courteous in tone. It should be encouraging and always offer suggestions for improvement. While SMJ supplies a structured review form, reviewers are strongly encouraged to make specific pertinent comments on the form itself, or typewritten on additional sheets. Reviews that are too short or lack sufficient specific comments are not favoured. Such scanty reviews do not help the editor, who may not be an expert in that particular field, in making an informed decision. They are often not helpful to the author as well, in terms of making improvements to his or her manuscript.

The valuable contributions of our reviewers are publicly acknowledged through the annual listing of individuals who have reviewed for SMJ over the past year. The Singapore Medical Council (SMC) has recognised the value of reviewing towards continuing medical education (CME) by awarding CME points for this activity. While registered medical practitioners still have to individually submit their claims to SMC, SMJ has started furnishing SMC with monthly lists of our reviewers together with their MCR numbers, and title of manuscripts they have reviewed. This service aids SMC in verifying CME claims for those who have reviewed for SMJ.

The professional importance of being a journal reviewer has also been recognised by the management of some restructured hospitals through incorporation as an item in their annual staff performance appraisal. This approach is laudable and highly recommended. SMJ will be happy to work together with the Ministry of Health, the two national healthcare clusters and individual hospitals in providing verification of their employees who have reviewed for SMJ.

Since January 2004, SMJ has introduced a grading system for all manuscript reviewers. Reviewers are scored according to the quality of

Authors have to understand that reviewers have important responsibilities to fulfil, and learn to appreciate their comments while adopting an open attitude, so as to ensure a successful outcome for all parties.

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their reviews and timeliness of return of their assigned review. While the actual scores will remain confidential, SMJ intends to provide recognition, through award of certificates of reviewing with distinction, to those individuals who have consistently achieved high scores and who have reviewed frequently for our journal. The inaugural recipients of these awards will be announced at the end of the 2005 review cycle. Reviewers who achieve sustained high performances will be considered for appointment to the SMJ editorial board.

In summary, the expert reviewer is a vital and indispensable component of the manuscript processing and publication system. SMJ's top reviewers are worth their weight in gold. Authors have to understand that reviewers have important responsibilities to fulfil, and learn to appreciate their comments while adopting an open attitude, so as to ensure a successful outcome for all parties. 