

Reviewer refusal rates for 300,866 requested reviews in 20 BMJ Group journals

Simon Chapman PhD (simon.chapman@sydney.edu.au)

Andrew Hayen PhD

School of Public Health

University of Sydney

The integrity of peer reviewing depends on the quality of reviews provided to authors. Many journals invite authors to nominate suitable reviewers and editors have access to often vast lists of names linked to expertise keywords, sometimes together with data on past reviewing performance. Together, these names are used by editors to select reviewers.

Author SC is a senior editor and former editor of Tobacco Control and has access to summary data on reviewer acceptance and refusal for each of the BMJ stable of journals. These data were extracted from the BenchPress editorial management system for 20 journals which each had data for the years 2002-2010 (see Table). We examined whether there were differences among journals on reviewer refusal rates.

Table: Total reviews solicited and refusals for 20 BMJ journals, 2002-2010

Journal	Total reviews solicited	Refusals (%)
ArchDisChild	21533	7234 (33.6)
AnnRheumDis	23676	8173 (34.5)
BrJSportsMed	11297	3756 (33.2)
BrJOPathol	21240	7800 (36.7)
BMJ	28293	11225 (39.7)
EmergMedJ	9833	2208 (22.5)
Gut	27810	8877 (31.9)
Heart	24727	5247 (21.2)
InjuryPrev	5086	1517 (29.8)
JClinPathol	10478	2789 (26.6)
JEpidemCommHealth	16039	6359 (39.6)
JMedEthics	4914	1472 (30.0)
JMedGenet	10522	3621 (34.4)
JNeuroNeurosurgPsychiat	37348	11436 (30.6)
PostgradMedJ	7866	2567 (32.6)
OccupEnvMed	8377	3330 (39.8)
QualSafetyHealthCare	5983	1746 (29.2)
SexTransInf	6450	2113 (32.8)
Tob Control	3991	1247 (31.2)
Thorax	15403	4733 (30.7)
Total	300866	97450 (32.4)

Across all journals, nearly one in three requests to review were declined. There was a significant difference in the proportion of refusals by journal (chi-squared test statistic = 3694.3, df = 19, $p < 0.001$). Adjusted residuals for refusals [1] were negative and particularly large for *Heart* (-39.2), *Emergency Medicine Journal* (-21.4) and *JClinPathol* (-12.9), suggesting that refusal rates were relatively low for these journals. Similarly, adjusted residuals for refusals were positive and large for *BMJ* (27.5), *JECH* (20.2), *OEM* (14.6) and *BJO* (14.0), indicating that these journals had much higher refusal rates.

Nearly all reviewers are themselves active researchers and as such, would hope that their own work would be reviewed by those given high priority by experienced editors, rather than being passed down the “food chain” to those judged as less suitable. With nearly one in three requests to review being declined, the *noblesse oblige* to “do unto others” in regard to reviewing appears to be rather parlous.

Reviewers can decline to review for many reasons with reviewer overload, workload burdens and disinterest in a paper all being common. All journal editors know the endemic problem of reviewer refusal and its role in delaying decision making, but authors are never told whether their reviewers were those first selected, or whether they were second, third or even much lower choices. Future research could consider whether there is any relationship between the order of priority of being asked to review and review quality.

References

1. Agresti A. (1996) *An introduction to categorical data analysis*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.