

Acta Médica Portuguesa and Peer-review: Quick and Brutal!



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Acta Médica Portuguesa is a scientific peer-reviewed journal.

As per definition, *peer-review* is a procedure of self-regulation and evaluation which aims to assure the quality of a publication. It acts as a filter against plagiarism, conflicts of interest and other forms of poor scientific behaviour. On the other hand, peer-review may be a constructive opportunity towards better articles.¹

The origin of peer-review goes back to the 17th Century academic societies; however its full recognition as part of the scholar and scientific publication procedure only took place in the middle of the 20th Century.

Each year about 1.8 million peer-reviewed articles are published. If each one of these is evaluated by at least two reviewers, this means a minimum of 3.6 million reviewed reports are being issued per year.² We therefore feel it is important that this subject should be addressed and that there is a need for some clarification.

The great increase in scientific output turned the reviewing procedure more complex, which in turn is the reason why publications are only able to publish a small fraction of the submitted articles. Rejection rates differ from journal to journal and is based on a number of requirements such as standard quality defined by editors, quantity of submitted manuscripts and constraints resulting from the amount of space available in the journal. Often, rejection does not mean the article is not good, it only means the journal is not able to publish every single work they receive.

The rejection rate may be an indirect pointer of the publication's quality, and it is estimated to be over 30 to 40%. Leading international journals such as the British Medical Journal (BMJ) reject over 90% of their submitted articles.

Researchers' first contact with the peer-review procedure usually happens when they themselves are authors of a paper. It is unfortunate when manuscripts are not accepted for publishing, and this happens frequently, but sometimes it is misunderstood as a personal rejection. However, if authors understand the role and tasks of the editor and reviewers, they may take advantage of the peer-review feedback and use it as a constructive tool allowing them to improve the quality of their work.

Peer-review is the main procedure in all scientific publications. On average, a reviewer takes 2-4 hours to review

an article. This is an unpaid task, usually outside their usual work scheduled plan. In some cases, a review may take as long as 20 hours.

Evaluation of the submitted articles implies two different stages:

- 1st Editor's review, during which the editor assesses the quality, relevance, style and suitability for the journal's readers.

- 2nd Peer-review, where the articles that passed the editor's screening are sent to reviewers with knowledge and experience on the article's particular theme. These will advise the editor on the article's suitability for publication.

Many journals reject articles during the first stage, and choose not to subject it to review: they may not meet the defined standard quality, they may not be suitable for the editorial line, or, in spite of their qualification as 'an excellent article', there may be others even 'more excellent'. The costs of sending an article for review are very high and not justifiable whenever we anticipate it may be rejected. According to the former BMJ editor, "we were quick and brutal with many of our rejections".³

Readers trust the editors will assure the scientific quality of published articles. Editors need authors, without their articles there would be no journals, however they are responsible for defining the contents of the journal and make sure they meet the quality standards. Thus, they need to take logical consistent editorial decisions and select suitable articles for their readers, always respecting quality standards.⁴

All along the editorial process, editors act in unbiased and honest ways with the help of peer review procedures and associated editors, in order to assure the publication of important original, useful articles that deliver the necessary methodological quality and interest for their readers. Editors are also responsible for monitoring the peer-review process and for assuring that it meets the set requirements of justice, speed, ethics, strictness and civility. Accepting the invitation to become a reviewer is a noble attitude, reviewing an article within the defined requirements and deadlines is an act of scientific citizenship.

Rejecting an article is one of the highest responsibilities of an editor's job. When properly done, this helps him establish the rules and determine the editorial content of his journal.

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Reviewers are intended to help authors improve their manuscript's quality, which is also one of the author's main concerns. Under this perspective, it is useful to interpret reviewers' comments as a gift.

Final decisions over the articles are taken by Editors-in-Chief. Reviewers offer precious advice, they recommend the suitability of the article to be published; however editorial final decisions are an exclusive task of Editors.

How can the author please the editor?

- Strictly obey the journal instructions for authors (publishing policies)
- Never submit your article to more than one journal at the same time
- Submit articles that are clear and well written
- Submit relevant original articles that may interest the journal's readers

The peer-review system is often compared to democracy: it's a very poor system, but better than all others.³

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