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Peer review

Andrew S. Wechsler, MD
Pamela W. Fried, MS

Dr Wechsler

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From Drexel University College of Medicine, Philadelphia, Pa.

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Address for reprints: Andrew S. Wechsler, MD, Drexel University College of Medicine, 245 N 15th St, MS 496, Room 6415, Philadelphia, PA 19102-1192 (E-mail: jtcvs@drexel.ed).

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Among this month's editorials is a contribution from Dr Frank Sellke discussing peer review from a reviewer's perspective. As the editor of the *Journal*, I could not do my job without using the peer-review process. I have written about the peer-review process and the fact that being identified as a peer reviewer carries with it both recognition and responsibility.¹ I remain amazed that we still have a few individuals who enjoy the benefit of submitting articles to the *Journal* for publication but when called on to serve as peer reviewers do not have the time or interest to do their fair share. With our electronic, computer-based manuscript-management system, we can now easily identify those individuals and will systematically deny them the privilege of receiving peer review.

At a recent editorial board meeting, we illustrated the performance of our editorial board members by using a scatter plot that relates the number of articles assigned to the time it takes for the board members to return their reviews. That plot is presented in Figure 1. It was fascinating to note that there was no relationship between the number of articles assigned and the time to receive a review. I mention this because the author of the article that accompanies this editorial is our most prompt reviewer. For the past 2 years, Dr Sellke has returned every review assigned to him within 24 hours. His is a Herculean feat that most of us can only envy but not emulate. It certainly demonstrates a commitment to the process and qualifies him to write an editorial on peer review.

We hear arguments against peer review, and a handful of electronic sites offer authors the opportunity to publish their work without review. Other journals tout application of the peer-review process, but their review process is cursory, superficial, minimally critical, and not committed to providing a fine filter for work that ultimately finds its way into the literature.

Some argue that unfavorable peer review has never kept an article from being published. If the work is not accepted by one journal, it is simply submitted to another and another and another until it is ultimately accepted. Fair enough. I would counter that observation with another observation: journals such as our own offer our readers some assurance that they are being given the opportunity to view work that is judged both credible and important. We assume no responsibility for work appearing in other journals with a less arduous peer-review process. In other words, buyer beware.

In our specialty, however, buyer beware often translates into patient beware. The thoughtless application of a therapeutic decision strategy, a diagnostic procedure, or an operative intervention on the basis of what someone else wrote and the surgeon has just recently read is a frightening downstream consequence of assuming that information is true just because it appears in print.

Therefore we take the peer-review process very seriously. We hope our reviewers will identify conflicts of interest that might confound otherwise objective commen-

Figure 1. Reviewer turnaround time in relation to the number of manuscripts reviewed.

tary. We thank our reviewers for their unselfish devotion of time to this mission. We believe that our peer-review process generally results in articles appearing in the *Journal* in better condition than they were when first submitted. Finally, we hope our readers appreciate the great service done by our colleagues who fulfill this very important function. We certainly do.

Note: For those readers interested in pursuing this topic, we recommend <http://www.ama-assn.org/public/peer/peer-home.htm>, the Web site of the International Congress on Peer Review and Biomedical Publication. From this Web site, readers can access articles from past peer-review congresses that examine in considerable detail many of the issues mentioned above.

Reference

1. Wechsler AS. Peer review: recognition and responsibility. *J Thorac Cardiovasc Surg.* 2001;122:419-20.