

EDITORIAL

The ethics of peer review

A few weeks ago I received a letter from an author whose paper had taken much longer than usual to get through the editorial review process and in the meantime some of the results in the paper had been published by another group. My correspondent believed that it was possible that one of our reviewers had, possibly deliberately, delayed his paper and at the same time had communicated results from his paper to the competing group.

While not accepting this criticism, his comments raised some thoughts in my mind about the ethics of the peer review process and the ethical obligations that I believe are placed on all engaged in peer review.

In submitting a paper an author expects that the paper will be treated as a privileged document, that it will be fairly assessed on its scientific merits and that the reviewer will neither delay the review process unnecessarily nor take scientific advantage of the results and ideas contained in the paper. The author also expects that scientific conclusions reached in a paper will not be rejected out of hand because they conflict with received opinions or run counter to hypotheses developed or held by the reviewer; once again only the merits of the scientific work and the logic of the arguments based on the results should be the criteria for acceptance or rejection.

There are, however, more subtle ways in which a reviewer can gain scientific advantage from the review process and this concerns the ways in which the ideas presented in a paper are handled. The most precious intellectual property contained in a paper is the ideas that it presents, and the reader of any paper, whether engaged in a review process or not, absorbs these ideas into a common pool in memory. These ideas may be subsequently drawn from this store and, in the most favoured circumstances, be the key element in the development of new scientific insights. Quite commonly the source of these key concepts may not be recognized as originating from a peer review and their use is an involuntary unethical behaviour. Given the way that the human brain processes ideas there is really no obvious solution to this dilemma because the 'chinese walls' invoked by the financial community when handling sensitive information from different sources I suspect have no reality. As far as the scientific world is concerned we should perhaps give priority to a scientific paper from the date of submission rather than the date of publication.

Another aspect of the ethics of peer review concerns the preview process that is now the customary preliminary to obtaining funding for research. I think that the research community must be unique amongst innovators in preparing detailed reviews of their field, the identification of key areas of uncertainty and experimental designs for advancing their field of understanding, and presenting them ready-packaged to their potential competitors; can you imagine how this approach would go down in other walks of life, for example in the car industry? This is an area where exceptionally high ethical standards are required; the reviewer not only gains fresh scientific insights and ready-made experimental designs but also the opportunity to prevent the work being done at all and, in extreme cases, end the scientific career of the submitting author. It is true that these reviews usually rely on two or more reviewers, but one negative review can be the deciding factor. I believe very strongly that our peers are the best-qualified people to make these kinds of judgement but they do demand the highest of ethical standards, especially in the current financial situation where research funding is limited and the competition for resources very keen. In such

circumstances the temptation to bend the rules of scientific ethics can be very persuasive. I know of at least three examples where detailed protocols were submitted for funding and were rejected, only for the work to be carried out in the laboratory of the reviewer. I wonder whether we are expecting our fellow scientists to be too saintly and yet, at the same time, I believe that we have a right to expect that the peer reviewer will behave in an entirely ethical fashion and not attempt to gain scientific advantage from the privileged position of the reviewer. If we cannot rely on the normal rules of scientific conduct we may end up with the authors of papers or proposals protecting their intellectual property in more formal ways; an eventuality which in my view would effectively stifle scientific publication and the free flow of information upon which science depends.

Some journals allow the submitting author to identify reviewers to whom their papers should not be sent because they regard them as competitors. I would like your views on whether the *British Journal of Nutrition* should go down this track; certainly if an author makes a case in confidence why a reviewer should be excluded we should consider the case sympathetically.

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