

Why you should always accept an invitation to review a scientific article

Peer review is at the core of scientific publishing. Each newly submitted paper is assigned to at least two or three reviewers. However, with growing numbers of journals and publications, this system is becoming more and more dependent on the voluntary work of peer-reviewers.

All clinicians or researchers with experience in a particular area of rehabilitation medicine may at some time be invited by journal editors to peer review a submitted paper. Reviewing a paper is time-consuming, and therefore the first reaction is often to decline the invitation with the excuse that you are overwhelmed with other activities. However, lack of time should never be a reason to refuse to review altogether. Instead, you should consider how many manuscripts, which specific topics, and for which journal you would be able to act as a peer reviewer for a particular period.

Why should you do this? There are several reasons why contributing to the scientific community by taking responsibility as a reviewer is valuable and important.

Moral obligation

You will have been invited to be a reviewer because you have expertise in a specific area, and might have previously published articles on the topic at hand. The editors may have checked the submitted article's reference list or searched PubMed, and your name has come up as a suitable candidate for reviews. Bear in mind that, for every paper you have published in the past, two or three reviewers will have voluntarily spent time and effort reading and improving your submission. It is essential for scientific rigour that other researchers review your work, and thus it is fair and realistic to expect to contribute to the peer-review system when other authors are in need of your support.

You might consider reviewing at least one manuscript per year for each of your first, second, or last authorship publications in that same year.

If you wish to be an author, you also need to be a reviewer.

To support authors

Authors who submit their work to a journal depend entirely on the willingness of reviewers to give comments, to improve the submission, and to revise the paper. Authors have no other option than to hope for a fair and consistent review.

To support journal editors

As soon as a paper is submitted to a journal, the editors decide whether it is of sufficient quality and of interest

for the journal in question. The next step is to select reviewers. Finding reviewers has become more complex over the years. In some cases, editors might ask more than ten reviewers before receiving one positive reply. This is frustrating and time-consuming, both for editors and for authors waiting to be informed about the progress of their submission. In fact, the difficulty of finding reviewers is often the cause of publication delays; something that most authors find very challenging in today's society when short publication times are key.

To support scientific journals

Scientific journals strive to publish papers of high quality and relevance within a reasonable timeframe. The authors appreciate a review procedure that meets these requirements, but ultimately this depends on the willingness of reviewers. In the field of rehabilitation medicine, editors, authors and reviewers all contribute to the successful system of scientific publishing. If reviewers are a weak link in this system, the whole process is at risk.

To gain inspiration for projects

Reading and commenting on articles gives reviewers the chance to gain inspiration for their own clinical or scientific work, and to stay up to date with the latest findings.

To be the first to read new scientific articles

When you act as a reviewer, you will be the first to read an article in progress and be informed about the results of the most recent research. This will give you an edge, and support your own work.

To learn new methods and statistics

Most probably, you are an expert in the topic of the papers you are requested to review. The design of studies and the statistical analyses do, however, change and develop over time. As such, it may be of interest to reviewers to learn these new approaches and take them into account in their own scientific work.

To improve your curriculum vitae

For young researchers and clinicians, especially, it is valuable to be able to put a list of reviews for high-impact journals on your curriculum vitae. It shows that you are acknowledged as an expert in a specific area of research, and that you are an active member of the scientific community. This may be beneficial when applying for a new position or writing a grant application. Never underestimate the value of a good reputation.

To be rewarded with free access to reviewer credit services

Publons, and similar reviewer credit services, provide a platform for tracking your publications, citation metrics, and peer reviews in one place. This information is quick and easy to maintain and can be used as evidence of your research output and review history. Access to these services is free for peer reviewers.

Conclusion

Without the help of reviewers, the publication of scientific studies will become increasingly time-consuming and costly. In order to advance science and clinical practice, the scientific community relies not only on high-quality research, authors and editors, but also on consistently high-quality and thorough researchers reviewing the research. This is of increasing importance in the age of “fake news”.

*Henk Stam and Kristian Borg
Chief Editors JRM and JRM-CC
and
Therese Granlund
Managing Director, Medical Journals Sweden*