

Peer review at *The British Journal of Family Planning*

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Peer review is important for the scientific standing of a journal and plays a central part in the publishing process at *The British Journal of Family Planning* (BJFP). Critical comments help the authors to improve the quality of a paper and assist the Editor in making a decision on acceptance or rejection.

Guidance for peer reviewers

Peer review has been criticised because, in the absence of standardisation, it is idiosyncratic and open to bias. To improve the quality of reports we provide reviewers with checklists of important points for commentary (see Box 1). Reports can then be standardised and evaluated according to open criteria. A transparent process that is shared with authors and readers, and with a public audit, makes the Journal accountable to its contributors and readers.

Open peer review

Peer review secrecy has been criticised because it can lead to irresponsibility, insulates reviewers from unaccountability and invites malice. Some reviewers might fear that they will personally offend an author, and may be reluctant to sign a report. Open peer review, on the other hand, makes peer reviewers more responsible and accountable for their comments, and promotes academic credit for peer review. We favour an open peer review process at BJFP, although the evidence on which to recommend it is lacking. Previously both authors and reviewers were anonymous. We now tell peer reviewers the identity of authors, and invite peer reviewers to sign their report if they wish. If not signed, the Editor reserves the right to edit the comments before forwarding.

The peer review process at BJFP

The manuscript is initially 'speed read' by the Honorary Editor. Depending on the topic, the Editor finds two reviewers in the database of reviewers with that specialist interest. The BJFP maintains a database of reviewers covering most of the relevant specialist areas. Reviewers are experts in their field, and are able to analyse the work of others and assess the scientific validity of a study. The list of reviewers is rotated. On occasions the Editor reads the paper in depth and can decide to reject an unsuitable paper, or to request resubmission as a brief report or letter.

The reviewers are given the title and, if they confirm that they can review the paper within 21 days, they are sent the full paper. They are asked to return the manuscript as soon as possible if the paper is outside their area of specialist interest, is the work of close colleague, or if they have other conflicts of interest. The manuscript is a confidential document and reviewers cannot discuss it even with the author. If they want to consult colleagues, they should discuss this with the Editor first.

Each peer reviewer prepares a report with the help of the checklist and returns this to the Editor, together with the summary of their advice (Box 2). The reviewers reports are fed back, mostly unedited, to the authors.

Box 1

**Peer review checklist and guidance for report (adapted from the BMJ.** The following checklist and guidance are sent to all peer reviewers.)

For all papers:

- Is it important?
- Will it add enough to existing knowledge?
- Does it read well?
- Does it make sense?
- Is it relevant for the BJFP?
- Is there anything in the paper which could give gratuitous offence or give cause for a libel action against the journal?
- Are there any possible breaches of confidentiality?
- Are the illustrations, figures and tables necessary/adequate?
- Does the paper require statistical review?

For research papers:

- 1 Originality: what and how much does the work add to the published literature? If so what does it add? If not cite references.
- 2 Importance to workers in family planning and reproductive healthcare.
- 3 Scientific reliability:
  - Research question clearly defined and appropriately answered?
  - Overall design of study: adequate?
  - Participants studied: adequately described and their conditions defined?
  - Methodology adequately described and ethical? For randomised trials: CONSORT style used?
  - Results: do they answer the research question? Credible? Well presented?
  - Interpretation and conclusions warranted by and sufficiently derived from/focused on the data? Message clear?
  - References up to date and relevant? Any glaring omissions?
  - Abstract/summary/key messages: do they reflect accurately what the paper says?
  - Statistical analysis appropriate and accurate? Please recommend referral for statistical review if you are uncertain.

For non-research papers

Use your discretion about the list for research papers when reporting on other types of paper.

How is a decision about acceptance made?

The Editor bases her decision on the reviewers' assessment of the merit of the paper. On occasion the reviewers will disagree on acceptance, in which case the Editor may try to get a consensus among reviewers, seek a third review or use her casting vote. The Editor can consult members of the

Box 2

Summary of reviewer's advice  
(Reviewers are asked to tick the appropriate box)

Acceptable without revision

Acceptable with revision that does not  
require reconsideration by peer reviewer

Paper to be revised and resubmitted for  
reconsideration by peer reviewer

Resubmitted as a brief report of 500-1000  
words acceptable as a short report

Not suitable for publication in The British  
Journal of Family Planning

Editorial Advisory Board who have not been involved in the peer review process and have no conflict of interest.

**Statistical review in the peer review process**  
The scientific validity of quantitative papers depends heavily on the quality of the statistics used. Most readers are

non-experts and depend on the Journal weeding out papers with poor statistical methods. Statistical issues can be complex and critical appraisal needs special skills. We have the services of a number of statisticians.

**How can we improve peer review?**  
The *BJFP* is developing an audit process for peer review. The audit scoring alone may not accurately reflect the value of a report and the Editor will provide general feedback to reviewers. Regular workshops for peer reviewers are planned at the national Faculty conferences.

**The contribution of letters to the peer review process**  
Even the best reviewers can miss important flaws in a study. Once published an article is exposed to the critical gaze of thousands. Unsolicited letters can form an important part of the peer review process. The Journal welcomes, and gives priority to, critical commentary on published papers.

**Recompense for peer reviewers work**  
Refereeing for the Journal contributes to reviewers' continuing professional development. Members and diplomates of the Faculty of Family Planning and Reproductive Health Care can claim two CME points per paper peer reviewed.