The Other Side of the Coin

Dear Readers,

It seems like a wonderful idea to have professionals look at each others' manuscripts before publication. Who could be more competent than peers when it comes to evaluating the quality of a manuscript and unearthing hidden errors? Managing a peer review system for the *Journal of Adhesive Dentistry* now for many years, I very often benefitted from the advantages of such a system. Especially running the review on an anonymous basis, it becomes even more effective. I remember with a smile the times young reviewers heavily, but rightfully criticized manuscripts by the big names on the research scene. However, this system only worked well when the difference in quality among manuscripts was quite large. On second thought, today I am not convinced that the peer review system is the right way to handle a journal, especially due to its lack of efficiency.
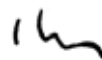
Let me explain: After the *Journal of Adhesive Dentistry* was granted an impact factor, the flow of manuscripts increased substantially. We also received quite a number of manuscripts which have nothing to do with adhesion (dealing with properties of materials which are used in adhesive dentistry is not close enough to the objectives of the Journal), obviously from authors who did not read the instructions for authors and just had the impact factor in mind. This is easy to handle, and it is the reason why the rate of outright rejected manuscripts increased.

The other problem is that now we must filter out the very best from the best. This is more difficult, as reflected by the fact that cases with completely contradictory reviews are increasing. As a rule, they are generating a third opinion, which is not very helpful. Furthermore, the reviewers are becoming more demanding, with the result that more and more manuscripts are sent for re-review, again decreasing the efficiency. And finally, as a reviewer of other journals,

I am currently observing another problem. I encounter the same manuscript several times, which means that a rejected manuscript is resubmitted to another journal due to the pressure to publish, and because impact points are vital for careers and funding. Even worse, I am aware of groups of scientists which routinely try to get manuscripts accepted by the very best journal, use the good comments to improve their manuscript, and if they are rejected, they try the same with the next best journal, repeating this process until they are accepted somewhere down the road. In fact, the reviewers improve their manuscript (as it should be), but at the end maybe the reviewers' input is more important than the authors'! In terms of efficiency, this is very bad. We are drifting toward the same level of inefficiency found in fundraising via grant application. Remember, to obtain a funded project within a system with a 10% acceptance rate, on average you write 9 out of 10 applications for the waste-paper basket. Furthermore, you keep a large number of your peers busy evaluating, again, mostly for rejection.

Thus, we must give some thought to ways of improving the system. However, the more I think, the fewer ideas present themselves, and the more I must learn to live with the situation. Maybe peer review has the same problem as the form of government: democracy is the worst way to organize a state, but there is no better one!

Sincerely yours

Professor Jean-François Roulet