The peer review process I: submitting a manuscript

Paul Riss

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Putting together a manuscript is hard work. After so many months of doing a study or organizing a review, the manuscript has to be written, edited, rewritten, and revised again until it is in its final form and ready for submission to a journal. But everything is not done yet. In order to increase the chances of having the manuscript reviewed favorably and finally accepted for publication, the final touches to the manuscript and the choice of the right journal are essential.

At this stage, it is a good idea to ask some questions regarding the manuscript to increase the chances of acceptance by a journal (Table 1). First of all, a healthy dose of self criticism is in order to assess the quality of one's work. The answer to this question will help decide the choice of the journal a manuscript is submitted to. If the paper describes a randomized controlled trial trying to answer a very relevant and timely study question, authors should not hesitate to submit their work to a top journal. If it is only an interesting case report, it might be advisable to submit to a journal farther down the list of ranked journals.

A second question is of course whether a manuscript fits into the spectrum of a particular journal. An author has to expect that his work will be sent back if the study question is not within the scope of a journal. By looking at the table of contents of a journal, one gets a good idea of the kind of articles the journal is accepting.

Once a decision is made as to where to submit a manuscript, the next step is to go to the instruction for authors and to read them carefully [1]. It is not only an act of courtesy but also a practical requirement to follow the instructions to authors of this particular journal meticulously. Following the instructions and revising the manuscript accordingly will not only help to be accepted by the editorial office for further consideration but also is the most important step an author can take to facilitate the review of his manuscript and to make a good impression on the reviewer.

It goes without saying that the instructions for structuring the manuscript, for layout and for citing references must be followed, and no author wants his manuscript to be sent back because of incompleteness or for having to modify the layout. Depending on the type of article, another important question is whether generally recognized criteria and guidelines have been followed [2]. Here, it is advisable to read closely the instructions to authors because requirements might differ between journals.

When the manuscript describes a randomized controlled trial very often the journal wants a statement that for example the CONSORT criteria have been followed. CONSORT is an acronym for Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials [3]. With reviews becoming more common, reviewers and journals often ask for the MOOSE statement to be considered (Meta-analysis of Observational Studies in Epidemiology). All these criteria and guidelines are freely available on the internet [4].

Another very important point in clinical trials is to register a trial before initiation, and many journals require the registration of trial before even considering it for peer review. At the *International Urogynecology Journal*, it is strongly encouraged that prospective, randomized trials are registered with a public clinical trial registry such as www.clinicaltrials.gov prior to commencing patient recruitment.

Two other editorials in this series on the peer review process can be found at doi:10.1007/s00192-011-1560-7 and doi:10.1007/s00192-011-1561-6.

P. Riss (✉)
Dept. of Gynecology and Obstetrics,
Landeskrankenhaus Thermenregion Moedling,
Sr. Maria Restituta Gasse 12,
2340 Moedling, Austria
e-mail: paul.riss@gmail.com

Table 1

A personal checklist

Is my manuscript within the scope of this journal?

Is my manuscript good enough for this journal?

Will my manuscript be of interest to the readers of this journal?

Also, proof of Institutional Review Boards approval is mandatory or an explanation for an exemption or waiver.

No manuscript is complete without a statement by the authors on disclosure, conflicts of interest, and funding of the work presented. The specific criteria are still evolving, but there is no doubt that these questions have to be addressed and answered to the satisfaction of the journal. In every manuscript, there must be a clear statement if and how the present work was funded: where did the money come from for the study or for organization of a review? Was industry involved? Was funding provided by an institution? If no special funding was necessary, then this has to be clearly stated.

Many authors do not seem to be fully aware of what disclosure and conflict of interest mean. Disclosure means that the author—all authors—have to tell the public what their relationships with industry are and what financial activities could have an influence on the submitted work in the eyes of a reader. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors has developed a form which many journals require and the *International Urogynecology Journal* strongly recommends to use [5, 6]. This information is then made available to the readership.

While disclosure is just what it says—to give information to the editor, the reviewer, and finally to the reader so that they can make an informed decision about the potential implications of the financial activities of the authors—conflict of interest goes much further. Conflict of interest concerns not only financial aspects but also every activity or personal or institutional relationships which could have an influence on the work presented. It is the responsibility of the authors to think about these aspects of their work and to signal potential conflicts of interest to the editors of the journal and to the readers.

It goes without saying that any form of scientific misconduct is severely frowned upon, although it might be argued that there can be a gray area. The instructions for authors of the *International Urogynecology Journal* list five types of scientific misconduct: undeclared conflict of interest,

disputed authorship, plagiarism, duplicate publication, and data fabrication or falsification [1]. Misconduct might entail disciplinary action from the journal, but first and foremost, it is an abuse of the trust on which the scientific community operates [7, 8].

A form of scientific misconduct which occurs not infrequently is salami publication, which means dividing a study into even smaller pieces to generate the highest number of publications. Often authors also do not reference their previously published work giving the impression that every publication is original. With the help of various search engines, this is more easily detected and reflects very negatively on the authors.

On a practical note, authors are encouraged to ask when they have questions. Authors should write to the editorial office or to the editor if they are in doubt about aspects of their manuscript. Once a manuscript is managed by the editorial office, authors have the right to expect answers in a timely fashion and are encouraged to inquire about the status of their manuscript when there is a time lag.

In summary, authors are advised to choose a journal where they themselves would expect their paper to be published. It does not make sense and is a waste of time—for the authors and for the reviewers—to automatically go for the journal with the highest impact factor. Second, authors should meticulously follow the criteria set by the journal they submit to—if nothing else, this is an act of politeness—and always remember that they want the journal to accept their work for publication. Happy authors make a good journal.

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