The peer review process III: when the decision is made

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From the author's perspective, the decision by the editor is the long-awaited final event in the peer review process. Although every author wants to have his or her work accepted for publication and to see it in print-on paper or digital, everybody realizes that acceptance is not possible every time. In fact the so-called rejected rate, the percentage of submissions which are not published but sent back to the authors, is taken as one indicator for the standing and popularity of a journal.

It is important for authors to understand how decisions by a journal are made. Most journals use several categories to summarize the editorial decision at the end of the peer review process: accept as is, revision, and rejection. It is unreasonable to assume that a manuscript is accepted as submitted for the simple reason that most manuscripts require some modification to make them suitable for publication. Rejection leaves no doubt about its meaning and is the end of the peer review process for this submission with a particular journal.

But some clarifications are in order: the *International Urogynecology Journal* has a modified category “accept pending English revision” because with submissions from all over the world, sometimes a manuscript is accepted on the basis of its scientific merit but is not ready yet to be sent to the copy editor who makes the final touches before the manuscript is actually put online and printed. Some

journals—but not the *International Urogynecology Journal*—have a category “reject and resubmit.” This means that the manuscript will no longer be considered for publication, but the authors are given the opportunity to write a completely new manuscript, without necessarily redoing the study, and to submit it again. This would be considered a new submission by the journal and undergo a new review process possibly with other reviewers being invited.

The most common decision is minor or major revision and this decision is often difficult to interpret. Authors tend to think that if they make the required changes, their manuscript will certainly be accepted for publication. Editors will have to send out the revised manuscript for another round of reviews (to the same reviewers) before being able to make the final decision which could still be reject. Authors should look closely at the decision letter and at the comments to the authors to see what they really mean. Sometimes the changes requested by the reviewers are too extensive—add more patients, change the protocol of the study—that it becomes impossible for the authors to comply with them. Authors should read the reviews carefully and decide whether they can respond to each recommendation made by the reviewer. If so they should revise the manuscript and return it to the editorial office.

But how do editors actually make the decision? There is no simple answer to this question because the decision depends on many factors: the number of reviews, the recommendations by the reviewers, and the opinions of the reviewers expressed in their confidential comments to the editor and in their comments to the authors. The *International Urogynecology Journal* also asks the reviewers to rate a manuscript on the basis of scientific merit, novelty, interest to the readership, etc. On the other hand, some reviews are practically worthless because they are not

Two other editorials in this series on the peer review process can be found at doi:10.1007/s00192-011-1559-0 and doi:10.1007/s00192-011-1560-7.

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detailed enough to give the reasons for the recommendation of the reviewer.

The biggest problem for the editor making the decision, however, is that reviewers often do not agree in their recommendations. What should an editor do when one reviewer recommends minor revision, the other reviewer major revision, and the third reviewer rejection? Keeping in mind that it is the editor who makes the decision about the final disposition of a manuscript and not the reviewers, the editor reads the reviews carefully, maybe rereads the manuscripts to get a feeling whether the manuscript can be improved sufficiently to be acceptable for publication. The main criteria are scientific quality of the paper and eventual interest to the readership of the journal.

Authors are often disappointed when they get a negative decision letter from the editor, but the comments of the reviewers communicated to them seem to be quite positive. Here authors should keep in mind the explanations given above, namely that it is the editor who makes the decision based on many different factors and not the reviewers. An editor never has to follow the recommendations of the reviewers blindly and it is up to him or her which recommendation is given more weight in reaching the final decision.

For the same reason authors should never argue with the reviewers. Reviewers are colleagues and experts who generously give their time and expertise to evaluate a paper and write a review. They must be respected even if an author does not agree with their conclusions. Authors should always ask themselves: if I cannot convince the reviewers of the merits of my submission, maybe the

general readership of the journal also will have difficulty appreciating my contribution.

If there are serious disagreements or misunderstandings, the author should write to the editor or the editorial office and explain their point of view. Formal appeals of an editorial decision are strongly discouraged, but in exceptional cases, it can become necessary to give additional explanations and to continue the discussion with the editor beyond the editorial decision.

At the *International Urogynecology Journal*, every manuscript is assigned to one editor who has sole responsibility for the editorial decision. This may not be the case with other journals where the editor recommends a final decision to the editor in chief or where the editorial decision might be a decision by a group of editors.

To paraphrase a line from a Monty Python song “Always look at the bright side of (life) rejection” [1]. A scientific journal is also a publishing enterprise, and its contents must be varied and of interest to its readers. Authors should and must be grateful for a structured review process which involves so much work, expertise, and goodwill from their peers even if the final outcome is not what they had hoped for. Authors should never despair. Good science will always find an audience or as another saying goes: Every good manuscript gets published eventually.

Reference

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Always_Look_on_the_Bright_Side_of_Life. Accessed 8 Aug 2011