“Revise before review; Reject without review; Reject after review”: why manuscripts are rejected

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Often the peer review process progresses smoothly through the steps: A new manuscript is submitted; appropriate reviewers are identified, invited and promptly accept; they provide a report that arrives on time recommending major revisions; the authors thoughtfully revise their manuscript to the satisfaction of the reviewers so that the revised manuscript may be accepted after some additional minor revision. However, sometimes the reviewers' opinions will diverge, with one recommending minor revision with the other recommending rejection. The editor will routinely send manuscripts with such reviews to additional reviewers, who in turn, have been known to return the recommendations of “accept” and “major revision”. Ultimately, it is the editor's task, rather than that of the reviewer, to decide whether a manuscript will be accepted, revised or rejected after review. However manuscripts that accrue the complete set of possible recommendations sorely test the mettle of the editor.

It may be argued that manuscripts that strongly divide the opinions of the reviewers, have some fundamental problem and so should be rejected. On the other hand, negative reviews must be scrutinised to determine whether the reviews are soundly based. An impasse may be avoided by giving the authors the opportunity to modify their manuscript as requested by the damning reviewer(s). But sometimes the authors may disagree with the reviewer and decline to modify their manuscript. The manuscript after all, is the work of the authors, not of the reviewers. Nevertheless, as authors address the review comments, the reason for not making any requested modifications should be explained. It is also good practice to acknowledge the concerns of the reviewer by modifying the text of the manuscript to more explicitly describe what the manuscript is addressing, and what it is not. If, in the editor's opinion, s/he is not qualified

to adjudicate a difference of opinion between a reviewer and the authors (not an unknown occurrence) then the manuscript would be sent to additional reviewers, or an editorial board member accompanied by a note that makes it clear that an adjudication opinion is being requested. The authors of a manuscript that is rejected before or after adjudication are of course free to submit it elsewhere. The reviewer of a manuscript that is published despite their review recommendation is at liberty, and indeed encouraged, to write a letter to the editor after such publication (as is any reader), to place on record the perceived shortcomings of the article.

What are the reasons medical physics journals give for rejecting some submitted manuscripts?

APESM rejects between 35 and 40% of submitted manuscripts without sending them to reviewers, some because their subject matter is outside of the scope of APESM. Another 30% or so are rejected after review [1]. The authors of rejected manuscripts are provided with the reasons and I think it instructive to summarise and publicise the reasons. Perhaps I should have used “the APESM journal” instead of “medical physics journals” in the heading for this section. However you will see below that the reasons for rejection are universal ones. Hence what I report about the reasons for rejection by APESM apply quite generally. An alternative to outright rejection is to ask that the manuscript be modified before being sent to reviewers. About 20% or more of submitted manuscripts are determined to be not yet ready for review and are returned to the authors for revision (our records on this statistic are not complete enough to be more definitive). The usual reason for requesting a revised manuscript is poor English expression.

The purpose of publishing the results of your research is to disseminate your work widely within the community of interested scientists. Clarity of expression is crucial to

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explaining your work. It is essential for the readers' understanding of your work and its implications. Consequently clarity of expression is a required attribute of a submitted manuscript. Manuscripts lacking this attribute do not serve their purpose and should not be published. Poor English expression in a submitted manuscript makes the text ambiguous and/or unclear. It forces the reader to guess at your meaning. It tests the patience of the reviewer. It is also an open invitation to the reviewer to recommend rejection of your manuscript.

Perhaps the problem of unclear English in submitted manuscripts is increasing, as more medical physicists and biomedical engineers for whom English is not their native language and who are working in non-English speaking nations (such as, for manuscripts submitted to APESM, China, India and Iran), seek to publish in English language journals. The solution is clear. Before submitting it, have your manuscript professionally edited by a person who is a native speaker of English and who has a knowledge of your field of research. Using websites such as *Google* translate or *BabelFish* to translate a manuscript into English will not do.

Apart from poor English expression, what are the reasons medical physics journals give for rejecting some submitted manuscripts?

It bears repeating that manuscripts whose English expression is clumsy, ambiguous or grammatically flawed will not be sent to peer-review as the text discussion cannot be understood. The editors have no wish to waste the reviewers' time by sending them poorly worded manuscripts. In particular, authors for whom English is not their native language, should have their manuscript professionally edited prior to submission.

To some extent, teachers are compelled to teach some of the same things to each annual cohort of new students. This is because the same old things are in fact new things to a new cohort of students. Similarly, editorials in "Journal A" may discuss the same issues that lead to rejection as those discussed in editorials published 10 or 15 years ago in Journal A (or "Journal B"). APESM currently rejects manuscripts for the same reasons that manuscripts were rejected 10, 15 and more years ago because the same flaws or mistakes appear in present day manuscripts as have always existed. Hence there is a certain timelessness to writing about the reasons that a manuscript may be rejected for publication.

Manuscripts that report research that has used human participants may be rejected if the consenting process for participants was inadequate. Indeed, since the beginning of 2017, all manuscripts published in APESM are required to have an ethical statement printed immediately prior to the

Reference list. While the occurrence is rare, APESM has asked to see the Participant Informed Consent Form (or its English translation) and has rejected on the grounds that the PICF was inadequate for the performed research.

Finding that a manuscript contains plagiarised material will trigger rejection. Plagiarism may be of the "cut and pasting of text" type; may be of someone else's figures or graphs; or may be a republication of an author's own published conference paper. As well as being dishonest, plagiarism is a subset of "lacking in novelty". Manuscripts that are submitted concurrently to two journals will be rejected. Concurrent submission is discovered because it is not unusual for such a manuscript to be sent to the same reviewer by the two journals. Copycat work, or work that is sound but not novel, is of limited interest and it will be an editorial judgement whether the manuscript is of sufficient interest to be published. Many manuscripts are adjudged to be sound but lacking sufficient novelty and so are rejected. Consequently, authors should state clearly what is novel about their work.

A poorly prepared manuscript is a waste of time for a reviewer and will be rejected or returned to the authors for revision before review. A poorly prepared manuscript distracts the reader from the method and the findings and leaves the editor feeling uneasy about whether the author has taken sufficient care in the research. The feeling of unease may begin while reading the Introduction. The Introduction will be inappropriate if the background is inadequate or if the state of existing knowledge is inadequately presented. This may be the case when authors cite published work in the form of a list but do not assess the knowledge ("author 1 did this, author 2 did that, author 3 used SVM" etc.). The reader is left wondering what the shortcomings of the previous work are and how the present work will address these shortcomings. The editor is left in doubt about what the problem being addressed is. Acronyms that are overused or unused, spelling mistakes, citing eight to ten references for a single sentence all add to the uneasy feeling [2].

A poorly prepared manuscript may have an inadequate Methods or Results or Discussion section (or all three). That is, a Methods section that does not explain why something was done the way it was chosen to be done. The discussion of methods may be mixed in with the Introduction or the Results and Discussion sections. The major results may not be identified from the presented figures and tables. Graphs may be presented with axes labeled with print too small to be read. The Discussion may not adequately discuss the results, or compare them with published literature, or discuss their significance or weaknesses. When there are five or six co-authors listed, one wonders how the faults in a manuscript can escape the attention of all of them. Submitting a poorly prepared manuscript will lodge in the mind of an editor the thought that the authors don't know what they are doing, and will result in a rejection recommendation.

Papers with methodological mistakes will not be accepted—but authors may be given the chance to correct them. Papers whose conclusions are not justified by the results are unsound and will not be accepted—but authors may be given the chance to correct them. Papers that are sound but that are adjudged to be of little importance or make a very minor contribution to the field, may not be accepted—authors may be advised to conduct additional investigations. A more recent phenomenon that may apply to some journals is that manuscripts may be rejected because they are adjudged unlikely to attract citations and so will adversely affect the journal's impact factor [3].

Below are some reasons for rejection provided by four other medical physics journals.

Physica Medica: These reasons may include: lack of proper English writing; lack of motivation (for the work) or lack of originality; weaknesses in the methodological aspects or in the significance of the findings and other specific reasons, which overall may indicate a general lack of convincing strength of the manuscript [4].

Physics in Medicine and Biology: Provides English-language editing support for authors before they submit their manuscript. It considers for publication articles which: “report original science, and add significantly to research already published; are of interest to the community; are scientifically rigorous; have sound motivation and purpose; have not been published previously in the peer-reviewed literature, including in another language; are not under consideration for publication in any other peer-reviewed journal or book available through a library or by purchase. It is particularly important for authors to consider whether they have enough new results before starting to plan and write a paper for submission to an IOP journal. Reporting incremental steps forward from previous work is not good enough.” [5].

Journal of Applied Clinical Medical Physics: JACMP provides four major reasons for rejection of manuscripts [6]:

1. The article was not sufficiently clinical. If nothing new is added by the study, if the study is a repetition of work already done, if the results are obvious, then the referees

are not likely to recommend acceptance of the manuscript.

2. Nothing new was added by the study described in the article.
3. The article was not sufficiently rigorous.
4. The English was poor.

Medical Physics: Manuscripts are expected to be written in excellent English. A manuscript with poor grammar or confusing text construction may be returned to the author without review. If English is not the first language of the authors, they should have a colleague for whom English is the first language review and edit the manuscript before its submission. AAPM does not tolerate plagiarism or any misrepresentation of original work. The authors' work is not suitable for the Journal or not of sufficient quality to survive the peer review process [7].

As can be appreciated, the reasons for rejection are universal. And inadequate English expression and lack of novelty are common faults.

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