

***Rural and Remote Health* guidelines for peer reviewers**

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Overview of peer review

The unique peer review process – where, within the editorial structure of a biomedical or scientific journal, academic peers formally evaluate a manuscript and offer advice for its improvement – has been much discussed and debated. Despite the comments of critics and polemicists, the peer review process is central to our familiar system of academic publication, and an essential component of producing quality published research.

A journal’s reviewers have the dual responsibility of being advisors to the editor and also to the individual authors. The reviewer’s careful and skilful assessment helps authors to improve their work, and also assists editors to identify research worthy of dissemination. This system continuously improves the standard of evidence available to those who work in the scientific and medical communities.

It is breathtaking to consider the scope of this cooperative, international system where the altruistic efforts of many individuals result in enormous collective benefit.

Peer review at *Rural and Remote Health*

Since 2001, reviewers have been using the *Rural and Remote Health* (RRH) online system to review rural health-related manuscripts. The journal database of

reviewers is now a substantial repository of international rural health expertise and knowledge.

Most material in the journal is peer reviewed, with the exception of some letters to the editor, invited articles, editorials and comment-and-reply exchanges.

Articles are generally assessed by three reviewers – two from within the world region of the manuscript and one from another region. Occasionally there will only be two reviews, and sometimes a fourth review is required (eg to clarify disagreement among other reviewers).

Most RRH authors are highly appreciative of referee guidance, with author surveys consistently showing a high level of author satisfaction with reviewer comments.

RRH criteria for selecting reviewers

Reviewers are carefully selected and invited to join our reviewer panel to review individual manuscripts. Our criteria are generally that reviewers hold a PhD or equivalent, or be a specialist clinician – and of course they will usually have an association with rural health that is either academic or vocational.

The exceptions to this are reviewers with specific knowledge required for a specialised manuscript, or those from under-represented groups or world regions. And occasionally a particular manuscript will require the assessment of a reviewer with a specific occupational qualification.

The origin of RRH reviewers includes:

- past authors of an article published in RRH
- authors of references in particular manuscripts
- members of the international editorial board and regional editorial panels
- academics identified from searches of databases such as PubMed
- colleagues recommended by other reviewers or editors
- reviewers suggested by manuscript authors at the time of manuscript submission.

After reviewer selection

Potential reviewers are initially approached by an editor, the journal manager or production editor by email. On accepting the invitation to join the RRH panel, reviewers who are not already journal users are asked to register with the journal. This is important because the review process is completed online at the journal site.

Once the reviewer is registered and an article allocated for review, the journal system issues an alert to the reviewer's registered email address. On receipt of an alert email, reviewers can access a PDF of the manuscript for review by logging in to the journal and opening their own status page. Because reviewers and authors are anonymous (double blinded process), the reviewer PDF will not contain any identifying features. Specific editor's comments for the reviewers will also be available on the status page at this time.

As well as a list of articles reviewed and for review on the status page, reviewers use this status page to submit their assessment, evaluation and comments. There is provision here for confidential comments to the editor, as well as the specific comments for the authors.

A feature added early in 2011 is the option for reviewers to *decline* an allocated manuscript. To do this, select the easy 'decline' link available on the review article information screen via the (logged-in) user status page.

Please be aware that the reviewer comments page on the RRH site is meant for uploading comments, rather than word processing. When it comes to uploading review comments for a manuscript, because we value your time and effort, all reviewers are urged to retain the text as a Word document in case of time-out or other disruption leading to data loss.

Reviews are usually requested within 3 weeks of the advice email. During that time, any general queries or reports of difficulty with the process should be directed to the journal manager, or sent via the 'contact us' link on the home page. Advice of a delay in submitting the review is always appreciated and avoids unnecessary reminders from journal staff.

Expectations

Peer review occurs within a cooperative system involving regional editor, reviewer and journal staff. To avoid misunderstanding, it is important that the expectations of both reviewers and those who represent the journal are clear, realistic and reasonable.

What reviewers can expect from RRH

RRH acknowledges the many demands on those in the academic and rural healthcare community. We understand that your time is valuable and so are highly appreciative of your efforts on behalf of the journal's authors. Because of this:

- communication will always be by email
- reviewers' communications will be answered in a timely fashion
- reviewers' time will not be wasted on requests to assess material unsuitable for publication
- if 3 weeks is insufficient to complete a review, an extension is available on notification and will avoid the annoyance of unnecessary reminders
- a follow-up email from the journal manager will politely advise when a review is overdue
- all reviewer comments and advice will be given serious consideration by the regional editor responsible for assessing and compiling feedback for the authors
- requests for review will not exceed the reviewer's stated number of reviews per year.

Access to all reviewers' comments and the editor's decision will be made available to the three manuscript reviewers for self-education, following assessment by the respective regional editor.

Reviewers can expect courteous treatment and are assured that their opinions will be valued and given serious consideration. Their contribution will be publicly acknowledged in an annual acknowledgement of journal reviewers published in December. However, please let us know if you would prefer your name not to be published in this list.

Access to the RRH database of reviewers is strictly limited to journal staff and regional editors, as is the identity of the three reviewers of any individual manuscript.

What RRH asks of its reviewers

It is disheartening to authors to have to wait long periods for a decision about revision, and sometimes the momentum of the work can be difficult to regain. Therefore, RRH's expectations of reviewers also begin with time considerations. Please:

- respond to a request to review by submitting your review within 3 weeks of the request
- advise the journal manager promptly if you are unable to review a particular manuscript
- advise any change of email address
- advise temporary or permanent inability to review (and this will be recorded)
- submit the review online.

In addition, as an extension of your usual ethical conduct, please:

- declare any *potential* conflicts of interest (financial or otherwise)
- decline to review an article in the presence of *actual* conflict of interest
- treat the content of the manuscript as confidential
- be alert to potential ethical issues in the manuscript under review, such as suspected plagiarism or duplicate publication.

In terms of the content of your assessment and evaluation, please:

- provide a clear evaluation of whether the article should be accepted with major or minor revision, or rejected
- provide constructive criticism that is fair, impartial, useful and clearly outlines the factors that underpin your publication decision
- comment on the content of the article, rather than detail about style and presentation (we have a copyeditor)
- make general comments about the reference list that encompass the quality of evidence in terms of currency and completion of the individual entries
- if you are a subject specialist, guidance about how to improve the reference list would be appreciated
- broad comments about English language usage and/or grammar may assist the author in preparing a suitable revision.

Occasionally reviewers are asked to provide the regional editor with a second opinion after an author's revision and resubmission.

Other important aspects of the RRH process

If an article is assessed as requiring rapid review, a personal request may be made to the reviewer to perform the review in less than the usual 3 weeks. It is understood that not all reviewers are able to offer this. However, if this is something you are prepared to do, please advise the journal manager.

While the RRH review process is anonymous, reviewers are welcome to 'sign' their comments for transmission to authors. Please advise the journal staff if you wish your identity to generally be revealed to the authors, or note it at the end of a specific review.

It is expected that reviewers will not make use of any of the work in the manuscript until after publication. This includes an expectation that reviewers will not reveal the content of a review manuscript to others.

When reviewers lodge conflicting opinions about a manuscript it is the regional editor's difficult task to make the final decision. Therefore, from time to time, a particular reviewer's evaluation, or parts of the evaluation, will be considered but not passed on to the authors. Likewise, if the editor believes certain reviewer

comments to be unhelpful or overly critical, the comments may be withheld from the authors.

The reviewer list is reviewed annually to ensure adequate representation and effectiveness. Because the review process is so central to journal function, reviewers who are unable to perform reviews are relinquished at this time.

Recommendations for new reviewers who meet journal criteria are welcome at any time and should be directed to journal staff in the first instance. Inexperience in reviewing is not a barrier to inclusion.

Reviewers are best placed to identify impediments to optimum performance of the journal's system of review. Comments and suggestions to editors or staff about potential improvements are always welcomed and given serious consideration.

Finally, in common with most journals, and as a not-for-profit, open access journal, RRH does not pay for reviews. However many reviewers report they are rewarded for their efforts by a sharpening of their own critical thinking, and heightened academic writing skills. We hope this is so for you.

Advice to those new to reviewing

Everyone has to start somewhere. RRH is pleased to include reviewers who meet the journal criteria but have not previously participated in the academic review of manuscripts. New reviewers' skills can develop quickly if they take advantage of access to the comments of more experienced reviewers' about a specific manuscript.

For those new to reviewing, RRH asks that you take time to become familiar with the content of the journal in order to understand the scope of material you may be asked to review. We also recommend referring to the reviewer sections of the current journal protocols available from the page:

<http://www.rrh.org.au/editorialBoard/defaultnew.asp>.

Information about peer review is available on internet search and many new reviewers have found the following articles helpful:

1. Neale AV, Schwartz KL, Bowman MA. Peer reviewing for the Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine: what does it take? *Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine* 2006; **19**: 643-647.

Freely available: <http://www.jabfm.org/cgi/content/full/19/6/643>

2. Cummings P, Rivara FP. Reviewing manuscripts for Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* 2002; 156: 11-13.

Freely available: <http://archpedi.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/full/156/1/11>

3. Roberts LW, Coverdale J, Edenharder K, Louie A. How to review a manuscript: a "down-to-earth" approach. *Academic Psychiatry* 2004; 28: 81-87.

Freely available: <http://ap.psychiatryonline.org/cgi/content/full/28/2/81>

4. Marušić M, Sambunjak D, Marušić A. Guide for Peer Reviewers of Scientific Articles in the *Croatian Medical Journal*. *Croatian Medical Journal* 2005; 46(2): 326-332.

Freely available: <http://www.cmj.hr/2005/46/2/15849858.pdf>

While the process of review is new, it may be tempting to discuss the content of a manuscript with colleagues. We do, however, ask you to bear in mind that although the manuscript has been submitted for publication, at the time of review the content of all manuscripts is confidential.

It will be of assistance to you and will enhance the quality and usefulness of your reviews if you are able to develop a methodical system for assessing manuscripts. Some (but by no means all) aspects to consider are the:

- title and abstract (are they representative of the manuscript content?)
- usefulness, originality and applicability of the research
- general strengths and weaknesses
- adequacy of the study design
- adequacy of managing ethical issues
- methods of study, including analytic and statistical methods
- presentation of results
- presence and appropriateness of conclusions
- adequacy of evidence in the references (currency, completion...)
- tables and figures (are they clear, logical and free of errors; do they support the text; are they necessary?).

If you have any concerns or questions please contact journal staff in the first instance, and we will do our best to respond appropriately and in a timely fashion, or to refer the question on if necessary.

Useful websites

-- *Rural and Remote Health's* current Journal protocols

Available via: <http://www.rrh.org.au/editorialBoard/defaultnew.asp>

-- The World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) Editorial Policy Committee's statement, *Definition of a Peer Reviewed Journal*.
Available at: <http://www.wame.org/resources/policies#definition>.

-- The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). *Uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals*.
Available at: <http://www.icmje.org/#peer>

-- Wikipedia's constantly evolving entry: *Peer review*
Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peer_review

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