

# Rural and Remote Health Journal protocols

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## Introduction

The journal, *Rural and Remote Health* is a not-for-profit, electronic, peer-reviewed academic publication. It aims to further rural and remote health education, research and practice. The primary purpose of the Journal is to publish and so provide an international knowledge-base of peer-reviewed material from rural health practitioners (medical, nursing and allied-health professionals and health workers), educators, researchers and policy-makers.

The core business of the Journal is to:

- \* Support rural health by disseminating rural health information in published peer-reviewed articles and other information.
- \* Advantage our system to become self-supporting/independent.
- \* Raise the profile of rural and remote health academics.

## Governance

The Journal is administered by the School of Medicine and Dentistry, James Cook University (JCU), Queensland, Australia through the Journal Management Committee (JMC). The JMC membership consists of the Editor in Chief (EiC), and representatives from the Federation of Rural Australian Medical Educators (FRAME) and other Australian rural health organisations.

The Journal staff (Production Editor and Journal Manager) report to JCU.

The members of the Journal's International Editorial Board (IEB) include the EiC, the Regional Editors (REs) and a statistical consultant. Each of the geographic regions (Africa, Asia, Australasia, Europe, Latin America and North America) have Regional Editorial Panels made up of regional specialists in the areas of rural health status, rural health policy, rural health education, rural health practice, and Indigenous/First Nations health (Fig1).

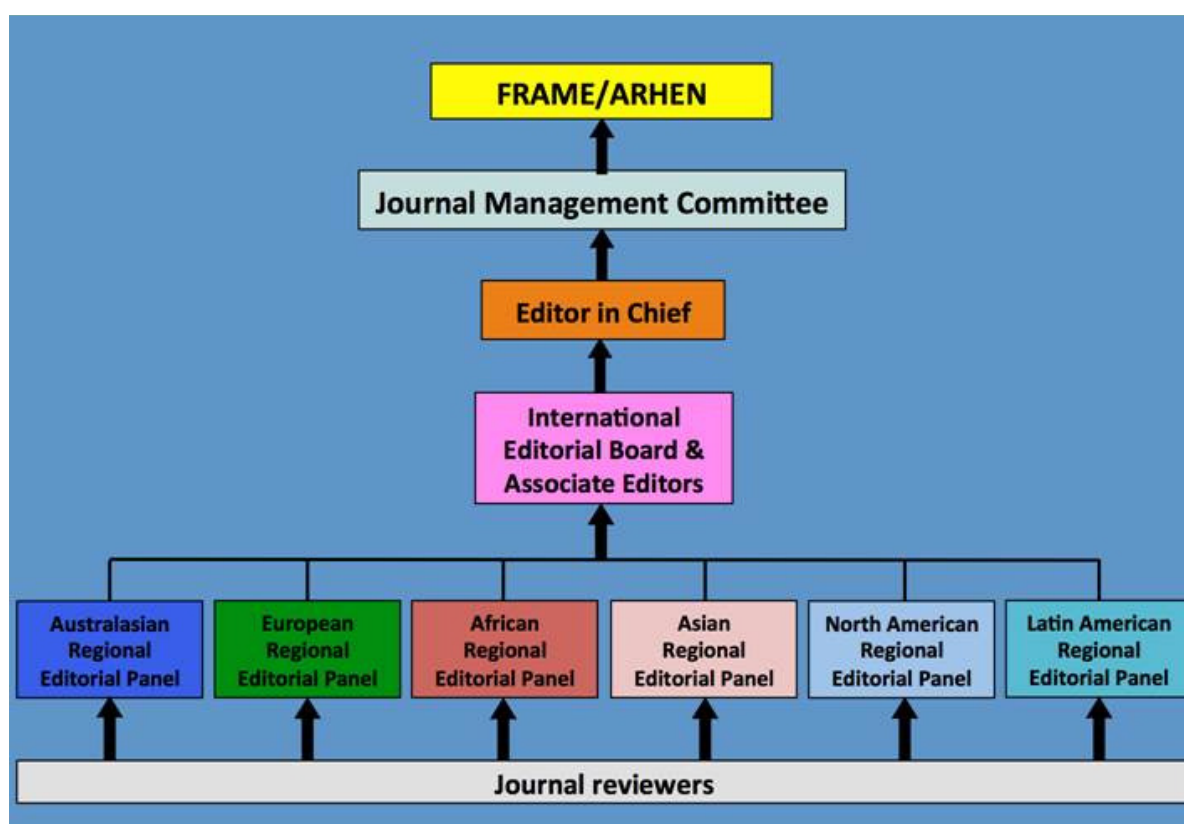


Figure 1: Journal Structure

## Policy framework

The Journal is operated on a not-for-profit basis and exists in electronic form only. The editorial office is electronic and accessed to contributors via the Journal site at [www.rrh.org.au](http://www.rrh.org.au).

The Journal is committed to the open access of scholarly information and operates ethically (with regard to humans and animals, authorship and conflicts of interest) and upholds the integrity of scientific enquiry and publication. The authors, reviewers, honorary editorial positions and staff form the human content of the Journal and are treated fairly and with respect. All editorial, review and governance positions are honorary.

The acceptable form of editorial content (article types) is as listed in the 'Instructions for Authors' on the Journal site. The stated article types and their word lengths are standard for each regional section of the Journal but will be reviewed by the EiC in consultation with REs from time to time.

All material except some invited articles (editorials and commentaries), some posts to the discussion forum (comment and reply), regularly published non-research material or news items and standing matter is reviewed by authors' academic peers.

The Journal is actively marketed and promoted.

Authors currently retain copyright and their intellectual property is actively protected. Authors' work is actively promoted to increase citation rates, which includes constant efforts to achieve indexing in and abstracting by appropriate databases.

Articles are published on an article-by-article basis; however provision is generally made for rapid publication if deemed appropriate by the responsible RE. Within the yearly volume, articles are compiled into quarterly issues. Special or themed issues are published from time to time with their respective issue.

## Roles and Responsibilities

### Journal Management Committee

The JMC has responsibility for overseeing the Journal's business aims, the scope of operation, policy development, business management, reporting and monitoring. The roles and responsibilities of the JMC are to:

- \* Determine the aims and scope of the Journal.
- \* Lead the development of the Journal and develop and monitor the Journal strategic and business plans (including budgets).
- \* Oversee business operations, marketing and advertising.
- \* Determine and review Journal operational policies and procedures, including editorial policy in association with the EiC.
- \* Uphold open access principles.
- \* Represent, publicise and promote the Journal, including at international forums and with rural health organisations.
- \* Report regularly to FRAME.
- \* Monitor Journal content in relation to established standards (eg ICMJE; NLM) and against performance indicators.
- \* Appoint, support and monitor the EiC, and appoint the REs.

### Editor in Chief

The EiC has overall responsibility, across all regions, for the editorial management of the Journal, according to its charter. This includes the maintenance of standards, encompassing ethical considerations, the mentoring of REs, and publicising the Journal when and where possible.

The Editor-in-Chief:

- \* Is an executive member of the JMC, reporting to the Chair of the JMC.
- \* Chairs the Journal International Editorial Board (IEB) and coordinates international publishing.
- \* Provides advice and recommendations regarding editorial matters to the JMC, Journal staff and REs.
- \* Has responsibility to the JMC for all editorial aspects of the Journal, including:  
Drafting and review of editorial policy.

- Overseeing the performance of REs, including their management of the relevant peer review and regional panels.
- Evaluation of REs (every 2 years).
- Determination, in association with the JMC, of standards of quality, ethics and peer review.
- Acting as an arbiter in situations of conflict or appeal.
- Assessment of all REs' submitted manuscripts and editorials.

### **Journal International Editorial Board**

The Journal's International Editorial Board (IEB) consists of the REs and the EiC (Chair). It provides support to the EiC in assisting with the ethical conduct of the journal, setting standards and assuring content quality, building the knowledge base of the Journal, and publicizing the Journal.

Each member of the IEB commits to:

- \* Attending meetings (where practical), either in person, by teleconference or videoconference, or in a web-based forum.
- \* Maintaining reviewer function, when appropriate.
- \* Participating in *ad hoc* email forums.
- \* Responding to other requests for advice, opinion or information by the EiC.

Members of the Journal IEB:

- \* Assist the EiC to monitor and thereby ensure Journal standards of quality and ethical conduct.
- \* Contribute to Journal editorial policy and procedures.
- \* Support and advise the EiC as necessary.
- \* Contribute to peer review by: (i) maintaining active reviewer status; and (ii) identifying and recommending new reviewers.
- \* Assist with the peer-review processes by reviewing manuscripts and editorial content when requested.
- \* Participate in quality control and performance review processes.
- \* Provide advice to the EiC according to their regional knowledge and area of expertise.
- \* Provide advice on Journal development through the EiC to the JEC, including advice on funding initiatives, specific geographic activities, and other requests from the EiC or JMC.
- \* Promote the Journal in international forums, to rural health organisations and to potential reviewers.
- \* Participate in developing growth and prestige strategies.
- \* Encourage article submission by peers, students and others.
- \* Contribute to the Journal by submitting editorial material or news items on at least one occasion each year.
- \* Be principal or co-author for at least one article published in the Journal during a two-year period.

### **Regional Editors**

The RE has delegated responsibility to coordinate, monitor, liaise, contribute and publicise the journal in their region. They have editorial responsibility for all regional matters, this includes:

- \* Balancing the editorial content of their of the Journal section (subject matter, standard of publication, article mix).
- \* Maintaining a process for constructive, prompt evaluation of manuscripts, whether accepted for publication or not.
- \* Working to improve the quality of submitted manuscripts.
- \* Overseeing the work of regional Associate Editors (if any).
- \* Ensuring the integrity and composition of the Regional Editorial Panel (REP) and reviewer panel by assessing the performance of individual Editorial Panel members every 2 years; and annually, in June, assessing the performance of individual members of the regional reviewer panel.
- \* Managing remedial actions necessitated by the errors of authors and staff.
- \* Declaring conflicts of interest with their responsibilities, and taking steps to deal with such a conflict.
- \* Planning the future development of their regional section of the Journal.

In collaboration with, and reporting to the EiC, the RE will:

- \* Coordinate and manage, in association with Journal staff, the peer review of Journal articles in their region, and regional publication.
- \* Assess submitted and resubmitted articles.
- \* Commission and prepare editorials, articles and reviews in association with the EiC.
- \* Supervise article revision, including collation of reviewer feedback.
- \* Collaborate with editorial and administrative staff in article production.

- \* Advise the EiC on regional matters and act as the regional delegate for the EiC .
- \* Chair the REP, including review of membership and regular communication with members, as well as assigning special regional roles.
- \* Monitor, support and motivate regional peer reviewers.
- \* Allocate articles to reviewers.
- \* Provide feedback by making available all three reviews to each reviewer for self-education and conduct an annual review of regional reviewers.
- \* Provide or participate to article “blurbs” for email alerts to accompany the publication of articles in their region.
- \* Liaise with regional organisations, maintain links with rural health organisations and establish and continue a relationship with professional organisations.
- \* Advise on alternate and/or additional funding, and contribute to international funding initiatives.
- \* Publicise the Journal at the regional level by conference and meeting participation, and in collegiate contexts.
- \* Contribute to the annual and other reports as requested by the EiC.
- \* Maintain active membership of the IEB, without the obligation to be a regular peer-reviewer.

## **Regional Editorial Panels**

Within the specific region, in cooperation with the RE, the REP is responsible for the regional ethical conduct of the Journal, content and quality of editorial material, building the knowledge-base of the Journal, and publicizing the Journal.

Members are identified by the RE and invited to join the REP for an initial two-year period, and after that to intentionally recommit for a further two-year period.

Members of the REP will:

- \* Provide advice and support to the RE.
- \* Participate as a peer reviewer of journal articles, maintain active reviewer status and recommend new regional reviewers.
- \* Prepare or contribute articles, editorials and other material to the Journal on a regular basis.
- \* Promote the Journal in regional forums and to regional rural health organisations.
- \* Encourage article submission by peers, students and others.
- \* Contribute to the Journal by submitting regional editorial material or news items.
- \* Be principal or co-author for at least one article published in the journal during each two-year term.

## **Journal Reviewers**

The Journal acknowledges that the quality of its reviewer panel is critical to maintaining and improving the standards, quality and impact of the Journal. The Journal values its reviewer panel highly and acknowledges their altruistic contribution to improving knowledge in the field of rural and remote health.

To be a member of the Journal review panel, reviewers should preferably:

- \* Hold a PhD, MBBS or equivalent.
- \* Hold membership of a College of Medicine or Surgery, or a scientific Society.
- \* Have ‘specialist experience’ in a field relating to rural and remote health.
- \* Have been author of publications in peer reviewed journals.

Invitations to be a Journal reviewer will be issued to appropriately qualified individuals by the Journal manager in association with the EiC or the REs.

Active reviewers will undertake at least 3 reviews each year in accordance with Journal editorial standards, including time lines. Reviewers will notify the Journal manager of a conflict of interest relating to the review of specific articles. Reviewers will notify the Journal manager of an inability to review, for whatever reason, in a timely fashion.

The list of Journal reviewers will be reviewed annually to ensure all reviewers are meeting Journal performance standards.

Reviewers will be provided with access to all reviews of an articles on which they submit a review, for self-education purposes.

The information held in the database of referees (including the expertise of each reviewer, email addresses and other contact information) will be held in confidence and not divulged to any third party.

The esteemed contribution of the Journal reviewers will be acknowledged annually by the publication of a list of active Journal reviewers.

## **Determination of Journal Content**

Journal content and editorial comment will be reviewed from time to time by the EiC in association with the JMC, IEBs and REs, with the following considerations:

- \* Content should reflect the issues and demands of each geographic region.
- \* The content of the Journal should reflect the needs and interests of readers and research themes current in rural and remote health.
- \* The content of the Journal should be of regional as well as international interest while always related to rural and remote health.
- \* At times the Journal may invite manuscripts on a particular theme or topic from experts in the field. The publication of such material will be conditional on the authors satisfying the Journal's usual standards of peer review and quality.
- \* Editorial content, to some extent, will be predetermined by the issues and demands of each geographic region.
- \* From time to time there may be a call for papers for, and subsequent publication of, a theme issue.
- \* From time to time a retrospective collection may be published on a specific theme or issue, as determined by the EiC and/or JMC.
- \* From time to time a joint issue with another journal may be arranged by the EiC and/or an RE.
- \* In order to attract new and high-quality manuscripts, prominent authors may be invited to submit manuscripts directly, subject to the Journal's usual evaluation and acceptance procedures.

## **Manuscript evaluation**

From time to time the Journal may re-publish (with permission and acknowledgement) articles of merit from small circulation print journals. These articles will not be 'reviewed' but re-publication will be decided by the EiC in consultation with the RE of the region of origin, or a member of the IEB or REP.

All material – except some invited articles (Editorials and Commentaries), some posts to the discussion forum, Comment and Replies, some Letters to the Editor, regularly published non-research material or news items and standing matter – is reviewed by three academic peers.

All manuscripts are allocated in the first instance to the respective RE. The review process is double blinded (ie authors and reviewers remain anonymous, unless a reviewer advises that his/her identity should be available to the authors).

Among the three reviewers, the following requirements must be considered when selections are made:

- \* Membership of the IEB or Regional Panel.
- \* At least one reviewer familiar with the geographic area of the manuscript's origin.
- \* At least one reviewer from an area different from the manuscript's region of origin.
- \* A reviewer of the same or a similar health discipline of the principal author.
- \* A subject specialist, where appropriate (eg statistics, policy, orthopaedics).

The EiC or the RE may serve as a peer reviewer where appropriate (eg manuscripts marked for rapid review or as a subject specialist).

If the EiC or the RE is a member of the author group (other than for an Editorial) another RE will manage the review process.

An RE may reject a manuscript prior to review if:

- \* The subject matter is outside the Journal scope.
- \* The quality of the manuscript is not competitive with others currently under consideration.
- \* The quality of the manuscript is poor.
- \* Authors' efforts to improve English usage to close to publication standard have not been successful.
- \* The criteria for the submission of manuscripts are not met.
- \* The manuscript was previously rejected and has not been revised according to peer review.

The specific RE will provide written guidance to reviewers in the reviewer screen of the article's status page. This may include directions about the article type, the time available for review, and article-specific information.

Reviewers are advisors to authors and editors:

- \* The RE may ask reviewers to make recommendations regarding acceptance or rejection of manuscripts,
- \* The RE assesses the manuscript according to the reviewers' recommendations
- \* The RE makes a decision about whether to proceed with publication after review.

In the event of disagreement among reviewers:

- \* The RE will review the manuscript and make a final decision.
- \* This decision will be communicated to the dissenting reviewer in an unapologetic but conciliatory manner, explaining the decision-making process.

Following review, the comments of all three reviewers are available not only to the author, but also to each of the reviewers.

The COPE flowcharts (on suspected duplicate publication; plagiarism; suspected fabricated data; changes in authorship; conflict of interest; ethical problems in a submitted manuscript; and complaints against an Editor) are used by editorial and Journal staff as guiding frameworks to manage issues of concern identified in submitted manuscripts.

## **Manuscript publication**

Following resubmission of a reviewed and revised manuscript, the respective RE evaluates the resubmission according to compliance with reviewer requirements and editorial direction.

If the resubmitted manuscript is assessed as ready for publication, the corresponding author will be advised by Journal staff, and publication proceeds in a timely fashion.

If the resubmitted manuscript is assessed as not yet ready for publication, the author group will be provided with the respective RE's reasons and invited to make a further revision.

## **Communication with authors**

The RE will actively encourage revision of potentially acceptable manuscripts.

The RE advises authors as soon as is practical, via the comments in the author's status page or a designated editorial office staff member, as to:

- \* Whether the manuscript has been accepted, accepted with major or minor revision, or rejected.
- \* The contents of the reviewers' constructive comments and requirements (referee comments may be edited to remove harsh criticism or demoralising judgements).
- \* The expected time frame for revision.
- \* If requested, the approximate time to publication after resubmission.

The RE should clarify which of the reviewers' recommendations are essential, and which are optional. If the reviewers' comments are contradictory, the RE will advise the authors which comments to follow. The RE may add comments and suggestions for revision.

The Editor may elect to work closely with an author on a major revision, or nominate a member of the REP or Journal staff member to do so.

When a manuscript is rejected, this may be based on scientific weakness (poor research design, inappropriate methods of study), lack of originality, lack of importance and interest to readers, lack of relevance to the scope of the Journal or due to inadequate presentation deemed to be unrecoverable. These reasons must be to the authors.

The RE should not make decisions about manuscripts in the situation of a conflict of interest.

If the author appeals rejection of a manuscript, while the Editor is not obliged to reconsider, editorial reflection should include:

- \* Was the basis for the decision clearly explained to the author?
- \* Could the decision have been wrong, for example based on an incorrect reading of the manuscript or inaccurate advice from a reviewer?
- \* Are the author's reasons for appeal reasonable?

The result of the appeal should be communicated promptly to the author.

If the Editor agrees to reconsider a rejected manuscript, the revised manuscript should be re-evaluated by a member of the IEB and a new reviewer.

## Comment and Reply

The Journal provides a legitimate form of exchange following peer review that allows fair discussion of potentially contentious issues. Comment/Reply/Comment exchanges and the Journal discussion forum, will follow these guidelines:

- \* Comments must have scientific substance and avoid personal attacks. They should be fair and brief (generally no longer than 1 to 2 screens).
- \* The Editor informs the criticised author/s of a forthcoming Comment.
- \* Authors of Comments must agree that the criticised authors have access to their final Comment text prior to publication.
- \* Criticised author(s) should then write and submit their response swiftly.
- \* Both parties agree that the post-publication critique ends with no more than one exchange.

## Retractions

In accordance with the guidelines of the COPE Council (*Retraction Guidelines 2009*) the *Rural and Remote Health* EIC will consider *retracting* a publication if:

- \* there is clear evidence that the findings are unreliable, either as a result of misconduct (eg data fabrication) or honest error (eg miscalculation or experimental error)
- \* the findings have previously been published without cross-referencing, permission or justification (ie cases of redundant publication)
- \* it constitutes plagiarism
- \* it reports unethical research.

An *expression of concern* may be issued if:

- \* there is inconclusive evidence of research or publication misconduct by the authors
- \* there is evidence that the findings are unreliable but the authors' institution will not investigate the case
- \* it is believed that an investigation into alleged misconduct related to the publication either has not been, or would not be, fair and impartial or conclusive
- \* an investigation is underway but a judgement will not be available for a considerable time.

A *correction* may be issued if:

- \* a small portion of an otherwise reliable publication proves to be misleading (especially because of honest error)
- \* the author/ contributor list is incorrect (ie a deserving author has been omitted or an included author does not meet authorship criteria).