Authors' rights: 2. Understanding peer review

In the last issue I explained that authors might expect the process of review of their manuscripts to take about 8 weeks from the time of submission, through peer review, to the editor's letter saying that the paper has been accepted, needs revision or is rejected. Some manuscripts take longer, but then others are processed very quickly. Although it's always tempting to blame Canada Post, most of the responsibility for delay is shared by the authors, editors and reviewers.

Once the editorial decision has been made we send a letter, usually asking the author to make minor or major revisions to the manuscript. This letter is always accompanied by the reviewers' comments plus some editorial comments and suggestions about format or style of the manuscript. At CMAJ we usually edit the reviewers' comments, primarily to be brief but sometimes to protect the author from comments that are unduly harsh, unfair or clearly a result of the reviewer's misunderstanding of all or part of the manuscript. Sometimes we deliberately include contradictory remarks from two reviewers, not to confuse the author but to stimulate reconsideration of the entire issue.

In the course of making their revisions some authors seem to believe that they must comply with every reviewer's criticism or suggestion. This is far from the case. The editors are merely conveying the reviewers' comments for the authors' response, which is to comply or to refute; only when the editors have seen the authors' response can they decide whether to accept or reject a criticism or suggestion.

If the editors have decided to reject the manuscript they also send the edited reviewers' comments with the rejection letter to the author. Sometimes we must reject articles not because they are not publishable but simply because the number of pages available in any issue of the journal is limited by the amount of money we have for printing and distribution.

Thus, we believe that authors have the right to know what the reviewers and the editors think of their manuscripts. They also have the right to disagree with the reviewers and the editors and are encouraged to explain why they disagree. We at CMAJ are interested in hearing authors' concerns or complaints about how their manuscripts were handled. We are also dedicated to making the publication process as smooth, educational and pleasant as possible for ourselves, the authors and the reviewers. Although editors must have the final say in what is and is not published, I believe that authors have the right to challenge criticisms that are made about the content of their manuscripts and to ask for reconsideration. After all, authors and editors ought to have the same goal. And in spite of what authors might think, editors do not like rejecting manuscripts.

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