working with them to use it to their best advantage is in everyone's interests.

Tessa Richards *Associate editor, BMJ*

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physician-patient communication and decision making about rescription medications. *Soc Sci Med* 1995;41:1241-4.

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What makes a good reviewer of manuscripts?

The BMJ invites you to join its peer review process

According to Drummond Rennie, deputy editor of *JAMA*, peer review exists to keep egg off authors' faces. Others might say it exists to shield busy readers from wasting their time reading inferior papers or to protect patients from the damaging effects of unreliable research. All may be right, although little evidence exists on how well peer review achieves any of these objectives. One thing we do know is that it helps editors to make difficult decisions about which manuscripts to publish and in what form. Here at the *BMJ* we are keen to recruit good new reviewers to add to the pool of over of 4000 who currently advise us. In some newer research subjects such as health economics and qualitative research our need for more advisors is particularly great. So what makes a good reviewer, and might you be that person?

Good reviewing requires idealism. It is often a thankless task which takes time and effort to do well, for nebulous rewards. Most journals do not pay reviewers, and the nominal £25 we pay at the *BMJ* bears little relation to the time and skill the job requires. So the primary reward is in the contribution the reviewer makes to the research community. This idealism is reflected in the quality of the best reviews, which combine a critical eye with a positive, creative attitude aimed at improving manuscripts and educating fellow researchers. The best reviewers concentrate on offering useful advice to authors rather than giving summary judgments to editors.

BMJ editors have recently taken part in a randomised controlled trial to assess the effects on the quality of reviews of blinding reviewers to authors' identities and unmasking reviewers' identities to fellow reviewers.¹ This activity has focused our minds on some more specific attributes we are looking for in reviews. According to the validated questionnaire we used for assessing reviews during the study, a top quality report is one which explicitly discusses the originality, importance, design, and interpretation of a study, in detail and with references from within and outside the manuscript.² It also makes specific, useful comments on presentation and is constructive. How far this editor centred measure agrees with what authors and others find helpful is the subject of continuing research; but, meanwhile, those are the characteristics that we value in reviews of potential *BMJ* papers.

There are several things we are not looking for. If we ask you to write a report on a paper we do not

necessarily want a firm recommendation about publication, although we welcome your opinion on this, as long as it is substantiated. Since we have space in the *BMJ* for only around 14% of the manuscripts we receive, many will be rejected with only internal peer review. Of those which are sent to an external reviewer, we still don't have space to publish all that receive a positive review. So what helps us most is good, detailed information on which to base what will in the end be an editorial decision.

We hope not to receive gratuitously negative reviews. Occasionally we encounter a blistering report crafted primarily to wound, to show the reviewer's scientific prowess, or to vent strong feelings. This helps us little if it is too destructive or personalised for us to pass on to the authors. We hope such reviews will become fewer as we move, as we hope to do this year, to "open" peer review, where reviewers are asked to sign their comments.¹ Courtesy, then, is a core attribute of good reviewing. To these many virtues add punctuality, which is an important part of giving authors a fair service, and an identikit image of our perfect reviewer begins to emerge.

Does your face fit the picture? Research suggests that the best peer reviewers are under 40,¹ trained in epidemiology or statistics, and live in North America. The higher scores achieved by North American reviewers in this British based study probably reflect the fact that they were a highly selected group of international experts, whereas the more numerous British reviewers were part of a less selected group. But whatever your age and seniority, wherever you are based, and whatever your specialty, if you are knowledgeable in your discipline, keen, critical, courteous, and thorough, we would love to hear from you. We are especially keen to hear from new reviewers from outside Britain. Please contact us at the editorial office, and we will send you a questionnaire asking about your areas of specialist knowledge as well as how many manuscripts you would be able to review each year. It may be that some time will elapse before you receive the first request for a review (because we have not received many manuscripts in your specialist area), but we look forward to hearing from you.

Sandra Goldbeck-Wood *Assistant editor, BMJ*

1 Smith R. Peer review: reform or revolution? *BMJ* 1997;315:759-60.

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