Editorial

TO PUBLISH OR NOT TO PUBLISH—THAT IS THE QUESTION

The decisions to which manuscripts to either accept or to reject for publication, represents the essence of every scientific journal. Editors want to believe that the largely anonymous peer review process, which has become standard at almost all publications, offers the best methodology for a relatively fair and quick manuscript selection process.

Authors, especially when they see their manuscripts rejected, may at times disagree with such a conclusion. As in choosing democracy over other forms of government, we are, of course, dealing in relative terms when hoping for *the best*, fully recognizing that the best may still be far from *the ideal*.

Our Journal uses a standard peer review process in choosing manuscripts for publication. This means that a large majority of submitted manuscripts are sent out for review to usually two reviewers and that the editorial office in principle follows the reviewers' advice. In other words, the editorial office only very rarely decides whether a manuscript is accepted or not.

In some instances, this may, nevertheless, be the case. For example, if the in-house review of a freshly submitted manuscript suggests that the submission does not follow our Journal's format, we may return the paper to the authors without review, suggesting resubmission after a style adjustment has been made. On rare occasions we may feel that a manuscript does not meet minimum standards for publication, either because of content or because of language (we receive many manuscripts from countries where English is not the principal language). In such circumstances, a manuscript may be returned before review to save the author's time and allow them quicker submission elsewhere.

In principle, however, the editorial office serves, in the model we are following, more like a facilitator than an arbitrator of manuscript acceptance.

Manuscript acceptance, however, does not necessarily end with the traditional peer review process.

Even manuscripts which have been tentatively accepted after peer review may still fall victim to editorial rejection. Indeed, it is the post-peer review process where often the principle responsibilities of the editorial office come to bear.

A recent occurrence will illustrate this point: A manuscript, submitted to the Journal raised, during the peer review process, certain ethical concerns. While reviewers agreed that the science appeared sound, they raised concerns about the ethics of the experiments conducted and opinions were split on whether the manuscript should be accepted.

In cases where reviewers differ on a manuscript, the editorial office often engages a third referee in an attempt to sort out such differences of opinion. The final conclusion of this extended peer review process, reached by the editorial office after lengthy deliberations, was that the paper would be acceptable for publication *if* the authors submitted proof that their experiments had, indeed, been pre-approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB), as they had claimed in their manuscript. After such proof was received, the paper was accepted for publication.

While the manuscript was in press, the editorial office suddenly received an avalanche of telephone calls from reporters from all over the world. The information transmitted was that one of the co-authors of above described manuscript had held a press conference in which he had allegedly alluded to the manuscript that was in press in our Journal.

There was no question that this author, indeed, had made reference in his press conference to the manuscript which was in the process of being published in this Journal. There was also no doubt that, in doing so, he had breached the prohibition towards unapproved pre-publication publicity which all scientific journals mandate as a condition of manuscript acceptance. In addition, however, at least some of the journalists who contacted our editorial office, following this press conference, also claimed that this co-author represented the paper (i.e the experiments conducted) in a way which, for the editorial office, cognizant of the real manuscript content, appeared to be a misrepresentation.

The editorial office immediately contacted the senior author of the study and requested clarification of (1) why unauthorized pre-publication publicity took place; and (2) what representations about the manuscript were made in the press conference.

When after a 48-hour notice period that had been extended to the authors, no response was received, the editorial office withdrew the manuscript from publication and informed the media of the fact. The authors were also offered an appeal process but chose not to pursue it.

We are presenting this detailed description of this rather unfortunate series of events to point out that the foremost responsibility of the editorial office is, of course, maintenance of this Journal's scientific integrity. Since the integrity of this Journal was clearly threatened by what had been allegedly represented at the press conference, the editorial office had no choice but to intervene in the manuscript

acceptance process post manuscript acceptance for publication.

Fortunately, these kind of decisions are only rarely required. Unfortunately, the above described editorial decision making process became public and subject to extensive media coverage in the scientific as well as the lay press.

This Journal, of course, does not seek such media coverage. And even though this undesired media exposure was brought upon us by the author(s) of above described manuscript, we throughout all of our contacts with the media fully maintained the confidentiality of the content of the manuscript that was in press at our Journal. We wished that the author(s) had acted as responsibly! Their manuscript would have appeared in print in this issue.

Norbert Gleicher, M.D.
Editor-in-Chief