WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST REVIEWING EXPERIENCE LIKE?

My first review took the best part of a day, but I felt satisfied my comments gave the authors a path forward to publishing an excellent paper. There was a plethora of resources available on the web to aide me in how to systematically address critical aspects of the manuscript when reviewing. As I was a postdoc at the time of my first review, I also asked my principal investigator’s advice on how they approach reviewing papers. They gave me the best piece of advice; “Does this paper communicate interesting findings that would aid and further other researchers... if so it is worthy of being published”.

As time’s progressed, reviewing papers has become a less daunting task and I’ve become more efficient. I still get a kick out of looking at research from an outside viewpoint and aiding authors in presenting their findings to the wider scientific community.

WHAT IS THE BIGGEST MISCONCEPTION ABOUT PEER REVIEW?

That editors select reviewers based on the status of the institution the paper is sent from. Specifically, that authors from more prestigious institutions will get an ‘easier ride’ with reviewer selection as their preferred reviewers will be selected. In addition, there is a misconception that introduction letters that accompany a manuscript, do not matter. They do.

WHAT WOULD THE WORLD LOOK LIKE WITHOUT PEER REVIEW?

Insights into a world without peer review can be garnered from high profile cases of scientific misconduct. The broad outcome of these cases was that other researchers took these aberrant datasets at face value and wasted valuable research time and resources pursuing hypothesis partially directed by the misleading research.

I reviewed a paper where authors understated the data, leading to equivocal conclusions. It was evident the findings were not significant due to a small research cohort size and use of conservative, unpaired statistical methods - paired comparisons were appropriate. Reviewing the paper, I realized if published in its current form, the paper would not have added to knowledge in the field and would just become another paper that was never cited as it did not draw meaningful conclusions. The new age of scientific endeavor is now not ‘publish or perish’ but ‘be cited or perish’.

My review highlighted these shortcomings in the study design and analysis. The authors ended up collecting more data and analyzed the data accounting for the change in study design. They were then able to draw meaningful conclusions, showing a placebo effect of a medical device that was previously not proven. This finding will indeed guide clinical practice in the field.

HOW DO EDITORS FIT IN?

Associate editors spend a large amount of time considering whom are the best reviewers for a paper i.e: who will most objectively be able to critique the paper. In selecting reviewers, associate editors often look at papers cited in the manuscript and identify key references, and will often try to use those authors as reviewers.

A good introduction letter that outlines the overarching hypothesis, the significance of the findings and how it is useful to other research, will help the associate editor and editor in gauging the relevance and why it is likely to be cited. Furthermore, outlining the reason(s) for suggesting preferred reviewers or why other reviewers should be excluded often helps in selecting the most appropriate reviewers for the paper.