PEER VIEWS: STORIES FROM THE PEOPLE AT THE HEART OF PEER REVIEW

Reviewer: Dr. Steven A. Pergam

Name  Dr. Steven A. Pergam  
publons.com/a/402430/

Current position
Assistant Member, Vaccine and Infectious Diseases and Clinical Research Divisions, Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, Assistant Professor, Division of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, University of Washington, Director of Infection Prevention, Seattle Cancer Care Alliance.

Area of expertise
Infection in immunocompromised hosts, particularly among cancer patients including those undergoing hematopoietic cell transplantation.

No. of reviews
42 (since 2010)

Number of manuscripts handled as Editor: 6.

DESCRIBE YOUR FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH PEER REVIEW.

I think my first opportunity with peer review can be broken into two parts. First, I was asked to co-review a paper with a senior colleague. This experience gave me the nuts and bolts of the process, and allowed me the opportunity to learn from someone who had significantly more experience than me. I had barely written my first paper, so input was critical, and doing a combined review took much of the pressure off.

I was more nervous doing it myself for the first time, as I thought it was my role as a reviewer to look for every flaw in the paper. I was so afraid that I would miss something important in the review, that I spent countless hours assuring myself I hadn't missed anything. I have no doubt that those authors were really annoyed with my long winded review.

Time has clearly made the process easier, but I still spend time in reviewing all the papers I commit to reviewing. I try not say yes to everything and focus on those that are ones I think I can contribute to.

WHY IS THE PEER REVIEW SYSTEM SO CRITICAL TO SCIENCE AND RESEARCH?

Peer review, while imperfect, provides the opportunity to get the critical feedback on your work that is different than the feedback we get from those around us. I think each of us who works in our respective fields, can sometimes be too close to our own data and whether we like to admit it or not, need outside input. Even our colleagues can't give it to us.

Critical feedback can help us look with fresh eyes at our work, can suggest analyses or experiments we haven't considered, or can assure us we aren't overstating the impact of the findings.

The reviews that end up having an impact on the final product are often the ones that I take umbrage with initially.

"These reviews challenge my assumptions and force me to address weaknesses."

At the same time, reviewers asking for the impossible (e.g. data that wasn't collected during the study) or a review that rejects a paper without providing critical feedback can be frustrating. It is a fine line.

I have not personally had experiences where peer-review has led to a huge breakthrough, but I do know that the review process has improved many of my papers. I have learned from reviewers and from being a reviewer, and I think both have improved my scientific writing.

WHAT IS THE BIGGEST MISCONCEPTION ABOUT PEER REVIEW?

For those who don’t do research or work in academics, I think many don’t understand that it is other scientists and researchers who actually do the work. For junior scientists turning in their first review, I think many assume it is only senior scientists who review papers. Making reviews more open could help to dispel both misconceptions.

Thanks Steven!