



Uniform requirements for medical journals – an idea whose time has come?

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Abstract

Uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals have been developed by the International Committee of Medical Journal editors. Authors are an important part of the journal but their perspective is often ignored. Certain journals from developing countries have problems with manuscript submission, review and publication process. Uniform requirements for medical journals to deal with manuscripts are urgently required. The authors put forward a reasonable time frame for various stages in the publishing process and discuss methods in which journals from developing countries can streamline and expedite the publication process.

Key Words

Developing countries; Medical journals;
Uniform requirements,

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) has developed a uniform requirement for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals.¹ The requirements mainly deal with quality of articles, requirements for data, copyright details and plagiarism. The authors of the manuscript welcome initiatives to improve quality of published articles.

On going through the ICMJE website (www.icmje.org) however, the authors were not able to find much information concerning the author perspective. The material in the website was predominantly from a journal perspective. Obligation to publish negative studies could be the only topic dealing directly with the author perspective. Authors are an important part of the journal and readers pick up a journal or go to the site on the internet to read author contributions. In this article the authors highlight the need for uniform requirements for medical journals for processing and dealing with manuscripts and ensuring a quick, reliable and objective publication process for authors. We aim to encourage debate and formulation of mechanisms to help journals from developing countries process manuscripts quickly and objectively.

The authors' experiences:

The authors have published extensively in journals from both developed and developing nations.



Overall their experience publishing with journals from developed nations has been positive. As regards journals from developing nations the experience has been mixed. Certain journals from developing nations need to really work hard at improving standards of manuscript handling and processing.

Certain journals have never responded to our submissions, have not kept us informed about the progress of the peer review process, have not been able to respond to our frequent enquiries about our submission and have not kept us informed about the progress of the submission. In certain instances our article which was previously accepted for submission has been rejected because a new editorial board took over the journal. In some instances our submissions have been removed from the online manuscript management system without informing us and without our consent. In many cases manuscripts have been stuck for years with a particular journal with no information on its progress despite repeated reminders. We are sure other authors will have similar experiences to share.

We are aware of the limitations under which journals are published from developing countries and appreciate the editors and the journal office doing a good job under tough circumstances. It is vitally important however, that authors are dealt with in a courteous, timely and efficient fashion.

Uniform requirements for biomedical journals:

We strongly feel uniform requirements should be followed not only by authors but also by journals. Journals should specify in their website and in the print version the usual time frames for various processes, their peer review process and method of dealing with grievances. We have tried to put forward reasonable time frames for various stages of processing and publishing a manuscript. In case of inordinate delays authors should be kept informed. Time for acknowledging a submission can be up to one week. Many journals have a manuscript management system (MMS) which can send an automatic manuscript receipt acknowledgement. The peer review process is a critical one for a manuscript. We feel one month is a fair time interval for completing an initial peer review of a

manuscript and informing authors of the decision. We understand reviewers are busy people but a time interval greater than this is unfair to the authors. Steps to improve speed and efficiency of the peer review process can include a small honorarium for reviewers who submit their reviews on time. The process of peer review of medical journals should be re-examined. We feel journals have the responsibility to keep authors informed about the progress of the peer review process either on the MMS or by responding to authors' mails. Journals should inform authors if the peer review process is likely to be delayed due to particular reasons.

Authors should respond to reviewer's and editorial queries within a month and re-review if needed should be completed within two weeks of the receipt of the revised manuscript. Another area of long delay especially with popular print journals is publishing a manuscript after acceptance. Some open access journals publish articles immediately on acceptance while others publish within a month. The average time taken by the journal to publish an accepted article should be mentioned on the website and in the letter acknowledging receipt of the manuscript. Journals should send proofs of the manuscript before publication. At present not all journals do it. We also wonder in many cases about the short time frame of 24 to 72 hours given to authors to correct proofs when the manuscript has been published only months later. More time to go through and correct proofs should be provided unless the publishers or the journal publish the manuscript immediately.

We feel six months is a reasonable time frame from submission of the manuscript to its final publication if accepted. If a manuscript is not likely to be of interest to a journal on editorial review then the authors should be informed within two weeks. A negative decision on peer review should be communicated within six weeks. We are of the opinion that journals sticking to these time frames will play an important role in stimulating research and publication in the third world. At present, manuscripts have been tied up with journals without decisions and proper responses for years together.



How should these requirements be implemented?

As mentioned the approximate turn around times should be displayed on the journal website and in the print version of the journal if applicable. The indexing services could play a role in monitoring journal standards. The turn around time should also be displayed in each published article. Groups of journals can get together and form independent quality monitoring organizations.

ICMJE should also consider the perspective of authors and take steps to ensure a ‘fair’ deal to them. ICMJE can take steps to form an independent quality monitoring body. Journals from developed nations can help journals from developing countries to streamline and strengthen the publishing process. Each journal should also have an ombudsman to whom authors can appeal in case of decisions which they feel are unfair or in case of inordinate delays in the publishing process. Authors should also be able to submit grievances to journal supervisory organizations.

Journals from developed nations can help developing nation journals to set up online manuscript processing and peer review systems. We believe an online system and a responsive journal management will substantially speed up the submission, review and publication process. Financial and other assistance to set up journal office and secretarial support will be helpful. Developing nations often suffer from a shortage of reviewers for a manuscript and in many cases reviewers do not submit their review reports in time. Various measures to strengthen, speed up and improve the review process should be debated and feasible ones taken up for implementation. ‘Journal managers’ can be trained in established journals but care should be taken to see that they stay in developing nations and do not emigrate to the developed west. Other methods to improve journal publication standards in the developing world can be debated and discussed.

In many cases an inordinately delayed publication is as good as a ‘rejected’ publication. Medical journals especially from developing countries should ensure a speedy, fair and objective publication process to their authors. Ultimately authors are the ‘life blood’ of a journal!

References

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PEER REVIEW

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no competing interests

Table 1: Suggested time frames for processing and publishing of manuscripts by medical journals

Process	Suggested time frame
Acknowledging the receipt of a manuscript	Maximum of one week
Peer review with decision conveyed to authors	One month
Authors revising the manuscript	One month
Re-review (if needed)	Two weeks
Publishing after acceptance	Four months
Total review and publication process	Six months
Informing authors of a decision to reject a manuscript	Six weeks