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Session: Editors’ Perspectives on Journal Review

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Heidi: We are at the top of the hour at this time, so I would like to introduce our two presenters. We are very lucky today to have Dr. Lori Bastian. She is a senior research associate at the VA Connecticut Healthcare System, at the Newington campus. She is also a professor and division chief of general internal medicine, and associate dean for career development, at the University of Connecticut Health Center. Joining her today, we have Chloe Bird. She is the senior sociologist at the RAND Corporation, and also a professor at Pardee RAND Graduate School. I am thankful to have both of them joining us today. Dr. Bird, are you ready to share your screen?

Dr. Chloe Bird: I am.

Heidi: Excellent.

[Background Talking]

Dr. Chloe Bird: Today, Lori and I will be talking to you about the responsibilities, challenges, and tips from an editor’s perspective, actually from many editors’ perspectives, on being a journal reviewer. Before the first slide, we want to give credit. We started with a deck of slides from multiple talks that \_\_\_\_\_ [00:01:19] provides, and we have built everything onto that. Not all of this is from \_\_\_\_\_ [00:01:22]. Lori gathered a lot of information slides and suggestions from colleagues at \_\_\_\_\_ [00:01:30] and otherwise. These are all brought together. Any errors or limitations are our own. We are very grateful to the journals, publishers, and our colleagues for their willingness to share their slides.

For the presentation, we are going to start with why be a reviewer, what makes a good reviewer, how you can be a good reviewer, and what an editor wants from a reviewer. We are going to briefly discuss some of the ethical considerations, how to tell, and what to do when you are the wrong reviewer. We are also going to take turns going back and forth, talking on different sections. You will not be hearing from me the entire time.

I am going to start with some poll questions. The first is whether you are a career development awardee.

Heidi: Thank you very much. For our attendees, you should see that poll question up on your screen at this time. Are you a Career Development Awardee? Yes or no? There is no middle ground on this one. We have a very responsive group, so thank you kindly. It looks like almost 90% of our audience has responded. At this time, I am going to go ahead and close the poll. I will share those results. Chloe, can you see those?

Dr. Chloe Bird: Yes. Almost two-thirds of the audience is Career Development Awardees. We did not ask what the others are, but we have one-third who are not. We will try to speak to both audiences. Can we do directly to the next poll question?

Heidi: Absolutely. We have the next question up, which is what your experience is in reviewing manuscripts for journals. Have you reviewed no manuscripts, one to two, three to four, or five or more? Again, we have a very responsive audience, so thank you very much. It helps give our presenters an idea of how much experience you have had, and how to level the talk. All right, 94% have voted. That is great. I will go ahead and close the poll now. I will share those results.

Dr. Chloe Bird: It looks like 19% have not reviewed, 6% have done three or four, and 75% of you have reviewed five or more. Probably many of you do that many a year. Thank you. Let’s go back to the slides.

[Background Talking]

Dr. Chloe Bird: Why is it important to be a reviewer? As a Career Development Awardee, you have more time to publish. This is expected to be part of your work, and part of being part of that community is contributing back and reviewing as you are submitting articles that need to be reviewed. This is part of what is expected as you publish during your Career Development Award. You should anticipate or already be serving as a reviewer, particularly at places where you are submitting articles and journals that you follow regularly. Once you have considerable experience serving as a reviewer, you may also be asked to serve as a deputy editor for one of the journals.

Reviewing in your career: One of the reasons to participate in reviewing is that it is a way to sharpen your skills. You see what is going on out there. You see other ways that people are writing, you maintain the critical appraisal skills that are helpful in guiding your own work, and in the comments, you give your colleagues by putting on your own editor hat and looking at your manuscript and developing it. Consequently, this can help you learn to write better. As you see a wide range of articles, especially new submissions, you can see how people do things differently, what works, apply what you like, and what works well. You can leave out what you do not like with your writing.

It is also important for promotion and tenure. In all honesty, that is probably not important unless you are notably commended or frequently reviewed for top-tier journals. If that is where you are trying to publish, you should be involved in doing some reviews for those. However, it will look bad if you do not do any reviews. You are missing an opportunity to be learning something.

As far as reviewing and your life, when we look past the career goals, ideally you will have some personal enjoyment from this. It is a chance to contribute a little bit to articles and manuscripts that are relevant to your areas of research and interest. It is relatively manageable time-wise. I often do some of my reviews while I am on airplane flights. You should be able to set aside a set of time to begin, complete, and do a review, even if it means you make a couple of passes through an article. It is a small piece, but you are giving something to the discipline. Like going to meetings, you learn about the latest research and you are a participant in your scientific community.

Reviewing is important to you and your scientific community. Publishing valid data is what we are all about. You can think of your career and your research as contributing to a conversation of work. These published pieces are important markers. This is your role or your opportunity to contribute to other pieces that are out there.

Optimistically, each article averages five or so peer reviewers prior to publication, because those are usually second submission, on average. There may be other reviewers brought in because the first two did not have all the expertise that was needed. Many articles go to, as you are probably well aware, a few journals before you get to the right place. Every time, it takes finding a couple of the right reviewers.

As a result, because you rely on the work of other reviewers and because they contribute to yours, it is also your responsibility as a member of the community to make sure that valid clinical studies are published, so that patient care can be improved and science can be advanced, depending on what aspect your work is involved in. you are both enhancing and helping to move good work forward. Getting comments that can improve good papers through critique is also an important part of your role, to say when something is invalid or does not \_\_\_\_\_ [00:08:31] sufficiently. It either does not get published or it goes to another journal where it might be more suited to the conversation and work that is going on, in that journal’s research community. This is a way of you giving back.

What makes a good reviewer: Clearly, we need expertise in one or more areas of the paper. It is not always the case that you have to have all of the highly specialized knowledge in its sphere, but we get every reviewer for a given manuscript that has expertise in all aspects of a paper. It is very important that you have either clinical or substantive knowledge related to the paper, or methodological knowledge so that you can say something that speaks to it on some level of expertise.

It is also critical that you have no conflicts of interest. You are not a friend of one of the authors, or for journals, that you are not at the same institution. We will talk a little bit more later on about other aspects of conflicts of interest.

It helps immensely if you are familiar with the journal and what kind of work it publishes, because it may be a matter of making sure a paper gets to a journal where it has a right fit, and that you have some familiarity and ease with what the organization and style of the journal is. It is not that we expect high levels of detailed comments from people, but it can be important to say that in this journal, this discussion usually belongs at the end, or more of that information would usually be provided at the beginning. Those things are disciplinary differences, but there are styles that are specific to each journal.

You need to be able to write a good critique. That does not mean that is long and verbose, but it needs to be accurate. It needs to be readable and it needs to be constructive. It could be organized around bullet points or chronologically, going page by page through the paper. You need to be able to give precise, clear, and constructive feedback to the authors. Ideally, it is consistent with what you say to the editors about the article as well.

Last but not least, you need to provide reliable and timely reviews. We very much need to get reviews back on time. By the time we found you as a reviewer, it may have taken some time and asking many people to get the right person with the right skills set. Not getting a review back on time is as frustrating to the author as it is to you when you are the one not getting a review back.

As a reviewer, we expect you to declare if you realize you have a conflict of interest or a potential conflict of interest. In some cases, we may say it is not specifically a problem if you can overcome it. In either case, you should let the editorial office know if you have any concerns that you might have a conflict of interest. Certainly, there are times where you feel it would be inappropriate for you to review a manuscript. You can just say so, and decline.

You need to treat manuscripts as confidential documents. It is pre-publication. This is someone’s work in development. It is their intellectual property, so you should not use any of the work. Certainly, you can draw on it after it is published, wherever it is published. It is not there as your reference material in the meantime. You should also not communicate directly with the authors. This is part of the process, whether you are going through a blinded review or not. Everything should be handled formally through the journals.

There are several dilemmas that a reviewer faces. The first one we talked about was reviewing. Sometimes the reviewer is too critical, or they are not critical enough. You need to avoid dismissive and snotty language. In my own case, I try to go back and reread the review with the hat of a sensitive author. I think of me. Would any of this come up as off-putting and counterproductive? It should just be the facts.

Identify the articles goals and address the relevant review guidelines. That means being familiar with what the journal wants. Does the article achieve what it lays out or promises to do? Sometimes just correcting that mismatch can make a paper suitable.

You need to read each section carefully and be familiar with it, just as you would if you were a grant proposal reviewer. You need to separate the critique of language and style from methodological issues. I typically write about the substance, variety of background, the literature, and the methods issues separately. If there are concerns about the quality of writing, the nature of the language, or the intensity of the statement of the findings and their implications, those should go in separate sections of your reviews. They should not just be all together.

You should reread your review before submitting it for tone, typos, and clarity. If you feel very positive about the manuscript, you should get that across too. It is not that everything needs to be negative. If there are points you want to make that balance some limitations, or if you are saying that you are very strongly favorable, you should get that across.

Dilemma #2, reviewers provide too much or too little guidance to authors: It is not your job to redo the study or the paper. It is not the job of the author necessarily. It may be beyond their capacity to do so. If you can provide guidance on what would be the best wording or what you would like to see done, that would be particularly helpful. Sometimes the very concise reviews that give concrete information on what would make it better are much more useful than longer reviews that are chatty or caught in the minutiae.

The third dilemma we talked about is that reviewers sometimes spend too much or too little time on their reviews. You need to develop a timeline of how long it usually takes you, set aside the appropriate time, and stop. In my experience, the best papers do not take nearly as long to review as the absolute worst papers. If you realize that you are reviewing something that you are going to recommend for rejection, you can focus on the biggest points and convey things to the author. You should not spend extensive amounts of time or longer on a review.

Dilemma #4, the reviewer uses too much or too little assistance: Sometimes there is an area that you need to get some feedback on, because you are junior and you want to talk to one of your mentors about it, making it clear that you are talking about a manuscript that is under review. You can selectively ask for help from colleagues or from one of the editors. It is better to say there are limits on what you can do as a reviewer, and you would like some input on how to handle it. Certainly when you are early on in reviewing, we recognize that you might need to get some guidance on how to write about one of your concerns. We would appreciate your doing that.

If you are aware that there are other areas of expertise that are needed, that you do not feel confident with certain aspects of the statistical modeling, please point it out specifically to the reviewer so we can catch that and get that additional review as needed. If you feel competent in general in the substantive area, but it gets into some minutiae of a special population that needs specialized care, saying so is very helpful.

Dilemma #5, should you, as a reviewer, agree to review: You should agree to review papers for which you have special expertise, or for which you have interest. You also want to consider how many reviews you are going to do in a year. What works for you? Use that to accept and decline accordingly, taking into account how many submissions you do a year. Many people do a rather large number of reviews and use that as part of their way to stay on top of the literature. You have to figure out what works for you, and not have it in the way of other aspects of your work.

I am going to turn it over now to Lori, to present the next section. Lori, are you muted?

Heidi: Lori, we just need you to switch screens. I am going to take control again really quickly. We will try it again. Just hit that dropdown menu.

Dr. Lori Bastian: Put it back on my main monitor?

Heidi: If you hit that dropdown menu, you should be able to hover over the options and wait until this screen is highlighted, the one with the slides.

Dr. Lori Bastian: It is not working. It did it when we practiced.

Heidi: No problem. Our audience is very patient and understanding when dealing with technology.

Dr. Lori Bastian: I do not think they are.

[Laughter]

Heidi: Okay, you are going to have it one more time.

Dr. Chloe Bird: It came back to me.

Heidi: I am sorry. There it is. No problem. Chloe, if I turn it over to you, would you be able to advance for her?

Dr. Chloe Bird: Absolutely.

Heidi: Okay.

Dr. Lori Bastian: All right. This is my dog Spock. Thank you Chloe, sorry.

What I would like to do is review some of the key criteria and things you should check the manuscript for. There is not a specific order to these. They are all very important. thinking about mistakes in procedures or logic related to it, is the introduction adequately set up for the methods that are going to be discussed, and really thinking about the conclusions and making sure they are supported by the results of the paper. Frequently, authors will go above and beyond their results in the conclusion. We want to make sure that the conclusions are supported by the results. Certainly, it is helpful for the reviewers to look at errors or omissions in their references, especially if it is a field you are particularly familiar with. There is compliance with ethics standards and making sure that if it is human subject research, that the authors have noted that and have reported that they have IRB approval. That is important.

The hardest thing to review for, I believe, is originality and significance of the work. That is a very important component, yet I think that unless you know the literature extremely well, it is the hardest thing for a reviewer to be able to comment on. The next slide please.

Other issues to consider as reviewers include the clarity of the research hypothesis, the originality of the work, which I have already mentioned, whether it is new, and if it will communicate something in particular to the journal’s readership. It is possible that a topic could be new in one journal and not have reached that audience. That could be important.

The strengths and weaknesses of the methodology, the approach, and interpretation: I think we are all used to being able to comment on those. Those are important in commenting some on the writing style, whether the figures and tables are presented in a way that the reviewer can relate easily to and interpret. I think that with the writing style, some of the early reviewers will get a little bit bogged down, and I know Chloe already mentioned this, with trying to fix all the grammar. I think that is sometimes helpful, to do some of that, but that is not the expectation that you are going to go through and fix all the grammar. I think that would be above and beyond what we are asking you to do as a reviewer. Ethical concerns we are going to address more in a few minutes. The next slide please.

This is a way of organizing the review, thinking overall about how the writing is, whether it is clear and concise, and thinking about the title. I think we frequently get so bogged down into looking at the text of a manuscript that we do not make sure that the title actually matches the results of the manuscript, and if the abstract also matches. One style I have is that I review the manuscript, and then go back to look at the title and abstract to make sure they fit with the text. Both of those are important. Really thinking about manuscripts that we review or we look at, we only look at the abstract. We really want to make sure that it matches the text.

We have mentioned the figures being clear and being standalone. It is the same with tables. There is the issue of using trade names, abbreviations, and symbols. You have to be very careful. I think each journal has guidelines on that, and following those is important. The next slide please.

When you are a reviewer, you are trying to evaluate the quality of the work. You are thinking about whether their methods are appropriate and there are enough details, if the data adequate to support the conclusions, and if all of the methods have results? I recently reviewed a manuscript where the opposite was true. There were results that did not have methods. You want to make sure that those match. You can see how an author could make that mistake. They start writing the manuscript and they are thinking about presenting it in a certain. Then they get comments from their co-authors to change things. They may not have gone back around and made sure their methods and results matched. That is important. Again, I will probably emphasize this about three or four times, because it is a big issue. The conclusions must be based on the actual results in the manuscript. The next slide please.

Chloe and I were trying to think of some components of a high quality review. What are the big things, as editors, that we think are important for reviewers, or helpful for reviewers to address? At this point, I should let the audience know that Chloe has been editor-in-chief of Women’s Health Issues. I am a deputy editor, so I am not the editor-in-chief, of the Journal of Internal Medicine. We think that in addressing readability, how well the paper is written, and the errors in grammar and spelling but not getting too crazy on that part, and getting some idea if the grammar is not clear and concise, and you will probably know that by the first paragraph, that it is fine for you to say this paper is going to take so much rework. Let us know that and give us a sense that this is important. Give us some sense of whether the manuscript is too long or too short, as well as if all tables and figures are needed. That is very helpful for us as editors. The next slide please.

Commenting on the topics and research questions: Does it seem important to you the reviewer? Will it be relevant to the audience of the journal it is being presented to? Is it original? Are there mentions that IRB approved and there were no conflicts of interest? Is the methodology sound? As Chloe mentioned, I think I would like to re-emphasize that if the paper would seem to benefit from a statistical review, it is fine to say that. We do this all the time, and almost all journals have a statistical reviewer. You can say that you really think it would be important for somebody to take a look at Method X. Do not be afraid to do that. That is actually very helpful. If it does not make sense to you, it is probably not going to make sense to a whole lot of people. The next slide please.

More on the methods, in terms of some detailed suggestions on how to improve the paper: Maybe you think that everything is great up until they get to the logistic regression model, where you would have done it completely differently. Provide that kind of feedback to the authors. That is very changeable. Some of it is not. If you really think it would be a whole lot better in a different way, giving that kind of feedback is very helpful.

Again, make sure the authors of the manuscript really understand their own data, are not biased in their interpretation of their data, and do not overreach their data. In other words, they have some idea about what the conclusion should be, and even though the results do not quite show that, they are determined that they are going to come to that conclusion. We do not want that kind of manuscript to be published.

With regards to the discussion, did the authors place their results in the right context? Did they do an adequate literature review? Did they address the limitations? Is the paper novel? Did the conclusions really follow from the study, rather than just a re-summary of the literature? The next slide please.

I mentioned that the literature search a couple of times. I think a quick literature search when you are asked to be a reviewer can be useful, particularly if you have questions about the novelty of the study. I think it can also be useful if you are wondering if the authors of the manuscript have published similar work before. I think it can be useful if you are trying to put their findings into some context when you are looking at the first couple of paragraphs of the discussion. In that way, a literature search can be very helpful. We are not, as editors, expecting you to do a literature search on every review that you do. Again, I think that when you are doing a review and you are very familiar with the literature, all of this is a whole lot easier.

As I highlighted, make sure the abstract and title agree with the body of the manuscript. That is something that, as editors, is our job too, to look at that. It is helpful if the reviewer can comment on that as well. The next slide please.

I was impressed that 75% of you have done five or more manuscripts this year. You are quite familiar with doing reviews. For those who are not as familiar with doing reviewing, you know that you typically provide information for the reviewer. That is where you want to use nice language and be kind, as if you were getting the comments. Provide detailed information about your review. Then you can also provide comments to the editors. That might be where you say that it is a great paper, but you are pretty sure you have read it before. You might give opinions to the editor about whether you think the manuscript is suitable for publication. All of these comments are confidential. They do not go to the author. The next slide please.

The confidential comments \_\_\_\_\_ [00:30:21] summarize what is helpful for the editor to receive from the reviewer are these. Basically, are there any fatal flaws? Is this fixable, or is this not fixable? Do you think the study design was poorly put forward and is not fixable? That is the information that we are interested in, in the confidential comments. The next slide please.

We do want you to be consistent in what you say to the authors and what you say to us. It really puts us in a bind when you tell us to reject this paper because it is awful, and you say to the author that it was a beautiful paper and it will contribute to the literature. We are going to follow what you tell us in the comments to the editor. You get the point. If you really like the manuscript, I think it is really helpful for us if you identify a couple of major strengths of the manuscript. We may have received three reviews and one person did not like it, one person was on the fence, and then you really love it. If you really love it, we need to know why you loved it and what some of the major things are that you think are strengths to the paper. As I mentioned before, give us a comment if you think it needs more editing.

Now I will turn it back over to Chloe.

Dr. Chloe Bird: All right. On that last point, sometimes what you think is a strength is what somebody else thought was a weakness. It is helpful for us to line those up and say there is a difference of opinion.

You need to keep in mind that you are seeing a privileged document. You are seeing somebody’s intellectual work. You need to be confidential in regards to the data. This is the property of authors. You should not disclose it to others, except where you are specifically asking for some assistance in a review, acknowledging that this is, in fact, privileged information. You cannot just take it back to your study team and go, “Oh my God, somebody is doing this other thing, and it is cool. Let’s all read it and use it.”

After a final decision by the editor, you need to destroy that material. Certainly, if you liked it and it came out later and was published, it would probably be okay for you to say, “I may have been a reviewer on one of your things.” If you did not like it, I think you should keep that to yourself, whether it comes out or not. This is a private process. You have shared responsibility for the review of the manuscript. If you did draw a colleague into it, you need to let editors know that you turned to somebody who had some other insight.

Reviewers should be reviewing manuscripts in an area of their expertise, be able to complete a review on time, and let the journal know if you cannot, if something changed. You avoid conflicts of interest. You are not using the data for your own purposes, research, or to make the world a better place. You have to wait until something is published. You provide an honest and critical assessment, even if they are researchers you are in some way competing with on a topic. Even if you need to say you have a different view from it, you can acknowledge that in a comment to the editor, so we can take it into account. You need to analyze the strengths and weaknesses.

The other point I really want to get to quickly is that part of the function of a reviewer is part of being oversight of the ethics. Recognize and report. If you believe there is duplication in publication, if somebody has cut the slices too finely, and this work is really largely published elsewhere, it is best if you speak up on that. If you recognize that it is plagiarism, and I have known of cases where somebody recognized parts of their own work or other misrepresentations, that is a very strong claim. You may not want to make that to the authors, although you could allude to the issue. Be forthright in your concern in that regard to the editor. Make sure you make a point of concerns of similarities to other works in the parts to the authors.

These ethics concerns will be followed up and handled by the editor and publishers. One of the points of having review of the strength of the methods, the recognition where you see there might be an alternative representation, or where the data is too good to be true, this is often how those very rare cases of data fabrication or falsification are caught. That is part of what we want, to know this is good and believable, or that you have concerns and why.

Some articles are rejected without external review. In most cases, the editor-in-chief or deputy editors evaluate the submission and determine whether they are put into the external review process. Sometimes this is fairly pro forma because something falls completely outside the domain of the journal. Other times, it simply does not meet the standard for things sent out for review. We look to see that the English language is sufficient and is well enough written. Sometimes we send things back saying that a strong English as a first language co-author may be required. We put things back to people saying that if they can submit a better version, they can put it back in and we might be able to consider it.

We also reject things if they are clearly the same work as has been previously published, or the data and findings have been published. It is never okay to submit an article to multiple places at the same time. Because you are in a specific area of expertise, you may see something that was rejected at one journal and another journal gets it. It comes back to you. It is entirely appropriate to say that you think you saw an earlier version of it. If it seems far too recent, let us know. If it seems to be overlapping, let both editors know, editors for both journals.

For the review process, we start and send articles initially to at least two reviewers. When invited, the reviewer gets the abstract, at least, to see if it is something they agree with. The editor generally requests the article be reviewed in two to four weeks. This varies, depending on the journal and the journal’s cycle. This is very important, that you be able to do that. If you had a few weeks longer and were willing to do so, tell the editor that if you cannot find somebody, you would be able to do it by you could only do it by X.

Articles then are revised until the reviewers agree, or the editors decide, that the concerns have been addressed or it is not going to be addressed and the paper is rejected. The reviewers’ reports have helped the editors in making a decision throughout the process. If a report has not been received after four weeks or whatever the window is, the editorial office will contact you. Please try not to leave things to the very last day. Life happens and you may not be available to complete it. If something has happened, let us know. Do not just sit quietly trying to deal with it.

If there is a noticeable disagreement between reviewers, we may seek a third reviewer or an editorial board member, someone to help with that decision when one person said the method is the strength and another has said it is the weakness. It may go to another reviewer. The anonymity of the reviewers is maintained, unless the reviewer for some reason asks an editor to make their identity known. We protect your contribution.

As I mentioned earlier, reviewers must not communicate with authors directly. All manuscripts and materials must be treated as confidential by us, our journal staff, and by you. We aim to have a decision to the author in four to 16 weeks, depending on the field and depending on the journal. The difficulty in obtaining reviewers and the lags that happen mean it gets pushed out very frequently to the high end of that, or well beyond it. In some disciplines, it may be one to three months, or so on. Look to your colleagues for when it is appropriate to talk to a journal, if you are the author, about not having heard something.

It helps to try to get things in on time. It is very important in meeting the schedule objectives, and it requires a lot of work on the part of a lot of people and a lot of administrative time on the journals. You should also treat authors as you would like to be treated. Try to say things in a constructive, helpful, and respectful way.

The most serious issues for authors to avoid and for reviewers to point out concerns about are fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism. If you have concerns about these, make some allusion to it in your review. Raise it with the authors, so that we can pursue it, to look and see if there is a larger concern. It was a point of great discussion at an editors’ conference I was at recently.

Unethical behavior by researchers degrades the scientific record and reputation of the science, medicine, and research. It is very important that we address these issues and maintain ethical conduct. These are just examples of some of the cases where something was published and had to be retracted. I know you are all aware of examples, such as some of the vaccine research, where it has caused tremendous damage, having something get out that was inappropriate.

What is plagiarism? Plagiarism is the appropriation of another person’s ideas, prophecies, results, or words, without giving proper credit. That includes those obtained through confidential reviews. At times, you will see in a published article that an additional analysis or change was made at the request, or based on the feedback, from an anonymous reviewer. That is an appropriate way to handle those things. You should give credit where credit is due, just as you would want it. To use people’s data, interpretations, or ideas without crediting them is theft. We all should be above that.

Correct citation is key. This means placing your work in context and acknowledging the findings of others on which your research is built. It helps to maintain the credibility and accuracy of the scientific literature. It helps readers and other researchers be able to work back and understand the literature you are building upon, or where you are referring to a debate in the literature.

I am going to hand it back to Lori now. Just tell me and I will cue forward with the slides.

Heidi: Lori, do you want to try sharing your screen again? Should we just continue on as we are?

Dr. Lori Bastian: Certainly not. I have no idea why it did not work.

Heidi: No problem. We will continue on.

Dr. Lori Bastian: That is good. I am going to talk for a few minutes, and then we are going to open up to questions about conflicts of interest, providing some examples here. basically, the question is which of the following are examples of conflicts of interest, a university researcher who owns stock in a large oil company conducts and experiment on the environmental effects of oil drilling, a university researcher who is developing and testing new technology and is also a consultant for a financial services firm that weighs investments in new technology, a researcher who submits an article to a journal for which the editor-in-chief is a professor in the researcher’s department, or a doctor who abides by traditional healing procedures, and writes a paper on emerging current medical technologies. The next slide please.

The point is that all of these are potential conflicts, all of those examples. Basically, conflicts can take many different forms, from direct financial, including stock ownership, to indirect financial, that you are a consultant or you have received an honorarium. There are career and intellectual, in terms of whether it affects promotions. There are personal beliefs, which can also present conflicts of interest.

The proper way to handle potential conflicts of interest is through transparency and disclosure. At the journal level, this means disclosing your potential conflict in your cover letter to the journal editor. I think the issue is putting it out there and letting someone else make that decision.

There is one other thing we wanted to touch on, because we thought this might come up as a question, regarding authorship. Who should be named as an author on a manuscript? Here is a situation where a researcher completed her paper and along the way, she consulted her advisor for guidance on the experiments, the data analysis, and writing and revising the final article. Should that advisor be a co-author? Another example is a professor in India who assisted her in analyzing the data only, or a lab assistant who helped her in preparing the experimental design and operating the equipment. It may be two graduate students who read her paper and edited it, so they had no hand in the experiments. The question would be who should be listed as an author, and who should be listed first. The next slide please.

Here are some policies to address authorship. They can vary. Different journals have some different guidelines. In general, any authors should substantially contribute to the conception, design, or acquisition of the data or analysis, and the interpretation of data. They should draft the article or revise it critically for important content. They should give their approval of the final version to be published. All three conditions must be fulfilled to be an author.

If we applied this set of policies to our example, only the researcher or person who is initially writing the paper, and her advisor, would qualify as authors. All of the others, if you remember the graduate students who helped her edit the paper and the lab tech who helped her with the experiments and equipment, as well as the person from India who did the analysis; those would all be qualified as acknowledged individuals. The next slide please.

The points we wanted to make here with regards to authorship are really things to be avoided. We do not want authors to be left out who have contributed, this notion of ghost authors. We do not want people to be given the opportunity to be a co-author when they did not contribute significantly. Those are things to avoid. The next slide please.

Thinking a little bit about the consequences for some of the issues we brought up, including plagiarism which Chloe brought up, the potential consequences and actions by the publisher can vary quite a bit, to be honest. They could include things like written letters of concern and reprimands. They could include article retractions. I think that sometimes it can go as far as disciplinary action on the part of the researcher’s institute or the funding body, for example, if the NIH or the VA were aware of those kinds of actions. The next slide please.

We wanted to save, and we almost did, 15 minutes of time for questions and comments. As Chloe mentioned earlier, we wanted to thank Elsevier for their slide deck that we used to develop some of our slides, and to get some content here for this presentation. Here are our email addresses, if you want to email us separately. That would be great. We hope that you now might provide us with some feedback or some questions, so thank you.

Heidi: Excellent. Thank you to you both. We do have some good pending questions. I just want to let our audience members know to submit your questions and comments. Just use the question section of the GoToWebinar dashboard on the right hand side of your screen. You can just click the plus sign next to the word questions and that will expand the dialogue box. You can then submit them.

This first question came in when you were talking about telling the submitter that you liked their paper, but were not recommending it for publishing to the editor. This is the question that came in. why wouldn’t you indicate this directly to the author?

Dr. Chloe Bird: It depends on your level of confidence or concern about the problem. I think the main issue is that you do not have to be prepared to directly address an author. You may have some degree of uncertainty. These are big assertions to throw around. If you are quite confident, it is certainly acceptable for you to make the comments directly to the author and affirm them to the editor.

Heidi: I am sorry. I misconstrued that. I meant more about this. What is the point of confidential comments?

Dr. Chloe Bird: To the editor? The point is that sometimes you might add your little \_\_\_\_\_ [00:50:11]. Sometimes you might add that you liked the view of somebody else who has also used this method, or so on, if you have any qualifications. It is not the case that there are always any comments provided to the editor. It may just be a take home point.

Heidi: Thank you for that reply. This is the next question. It starts out with a comment. The process of science requires confirmatory studies. How do you balance the desire for “novelty” in a study, with the importance of confirmatory work for establishing the evidence base? Do you think there is such a thing as an important confirmatory study?

Dr. Chloe Bird: I certainly do. There are replications that are useful, and there is a point where we have seen things many times and a specific replication or specific look in a specific population may not add to the literature. Lori, what do you think?

Dr. Lori Bastian: I agree. I think that the important thing is to make sure the confirmatory study acknowledges that other studies have been done before.

Heidi: Excellent. Thank you both for those replies. Can you speak to the concern about predatory journals? It can be hard to distinguish predatory versus legitimate journals when we are asked to review.

Dr. Chloe Bird: Personally, there are some lists online where you can put in a journal name and predatory, and get some suggestions of probable predatory journals. I would suggest that you focus mainly on journals that you know of or that you can look and get some legitimate information about. There are certainly times as an editor that I reach out of people who have not published in our journal and may not follow it regularly. They could be very helpful. It helps that our journal was longstanding as a print journal. With new journal coming up at an astounding rate, it takes more looking to make sure you know what you are dealing with.

Heidi: Thank you for that reply. This is the next question. Is there a particular format or structure for organizing a review that you find particularly helpful?

Dr. Chloe Bird: Personally, and then I am going to hear what Lori says, I would like to see the main points, the biggest concerns, laid out at the top. Then the rest of the concerns, the more minor, methodological, or easily addressable issues, even things that address specific paragraphs or pages, can be in a separate category. It is not just a mishmash. The more well organized it is, the easier it is for us and for the author to tell if they have addressed your concerns, and to understand them. Have you seen particularly good ways of doing this Lori?

Dr. Lori Bastian: Chloe, I completely agree with what you said. I like to see the big comments, and then I like to see the minor comments identified as fairly minor comments, and structured starting with the title, abstract, info, methods, results, and discussion. If you can do the minor comments that way, it is so much easier to follow for the editors and the authors.

Dr. Chloe Bird: I want to add this. If you are fairly new to submitting articles or to doing reviews, the best resubmissions take those comments and go through them very systematically. They will often say this was addressed on page blah-blah, or this was addressed at this place. It makes it very easily; internally or for reviewers, to look and say those things are handled and they want to focus on these couple of points, to see if they were dealt with. It could speed up your path through publication and review.

Heidi: Thank you both for those replies. It looks like we have about five pending questions. Given the competing demands to publish and maintain grant funding, how many reviews would you recommend an early career researcher agree to complete annually? Can you also comment on the process of becoming an editorial board member of a journal?

Dr. Chloe Bird: Taking into account that each article you submit is probably going to require five reviews out there in the world somewhere, if you are submitting three things a year, you are probably doing six reviews, and being sure that some of your other co-authors are doing some of them related to it as well. That would be sharing your weight. Doing more than one every other month or so, you need to make sure that you are getting efficient enough at it and that you are getting something out of it. You are focusing well enough on the areas of your expertise that it is rewarding. You are getting a sense of what is happening in the literature that you are working in. Obviously, there is a point of diminishing returns. I think it is going to vary for different people. Articles in different fields and areas have different lengths and technical requirements. It may not always take the same amount of time for different people. I am not sure there is a precise answer.

As for becoming a deputy editor, I think it is going to vary with different kinds of journals, what it takes to reach that level. Normally, you are going to review a fair bit for the specific journal. You have come up through the world in that sense and made yourself known to an editor. If you are interested in reviewing more and interested in that, certainly speak up. Lori, can you talk a little bit about the deputy editor process or position?

Dr. Lori Bastian: Sure. I think exactly what you said; connect yourself with a deputy editor. The deputy editors tend to be well connected with the editors-in-chief. At the Journal of General Internal Medicine, our two editors-in-chief are co-editors, Richard Kravitz and Mitchell Feldman, are always looking for eager deputy editors. They have in their minds deputy editors in specific areas that they are interested in, and in filling those positions. You could always contact editors-in-chief and express your interest, or connect with one of the deputy editors, for example, at the annual meeting, and talk to them about that.

Dr. Chloe Bird: Make sure that it is valued by your department or the senior leadership you report to, and that you know how much reviewing would be expected. It is easy to tip too far in the direction of service work, or into something that is not valued enough. You need to understand how you are going to fulfill on that. It might work for you. It might be personally rewarding, or it might turn out to be too much too soon.

Heidi: Thank you both for those replies. This is the next question. As a reviewer, I have seen manuscripts with a famous first author who has a well-known writing style. However, the manuscript that is actually submitted sounds nothing like that researchers’ prior work, leading us to believe that a junior author is doing the work and not getting credit. How do you address this as a reviewer?

Dr. Chloe Bird: That is a good one. If I faced that, I would probably start with some comments to the editor. It is also possible that the reviewer is writing somewhat differently on a different topic or in a different area. Look to see if there is a reason or if it would make sense, or if it is more collaborative in this one. Does it note that the authors are simply listed alphabetically? You can raise that question if it is an unblended review. If it is a blinded review, you technically do not know who it is. You might need to be more circumspect in explaining that. Often, it is the style that can cue me that a specific person is likely the author in a blinded review. Have you had experience with this sort of thing Lori?

Dr. Lori Bastian: I really have not, no. I think that comes to the place where that reviewer is so familiar with that area of literature that they can have that. As an editor, I would like to have that as something put in the confidential comments to the editor. I would figure out what I was going to do with it.

Dr. Chloe Bird: If you were very concerned and it was not blinded, it would be okay to say that it seems like a very different style from the author’s normal work, especially if you think the other would be more compatible or if there is a question. You could allude to it in the main text.

Heidi: Thank you both. We do have three pending questions. I know it is at the top of the hour. Are you two available to stay on an answer those for the recording?

Dr. Chloe Bird: Sure.

Heidi: Excellent. Thank you so much. If our attendees need to drop off, we do understand. I do have to say that if you do exit out of the session, please wait just a moment while the feedback survey pops up on your screen. It is just a few questions, but we do read your replies very closely. It helps us to plan our future sessions and improve the ones we have already had.

This is the next question. If you discuss something with a colleague, does this disclosure go in the comments to the editors, and do you name the person?

Dr. Chloe Bird: Lori, how would you expect this to be handled?

Dr. Lori Bastian: I think if you shared the manuscript with a colleague, and I think you would do that because you really had a specific question about something, you really valued that colleague’s input on that specific issue. I think I would share that in the comments to the editor. If you basically just ran an idea by a colleague, like, “Have you ever seen specific X done this way,” or something like that, I do not know that you really need to acknowledge that person. I think it really depends.

Dr. Chloe Bird: You might say you were concerned about something and you asked about the general presentation of the methods. You thought it would be much more helpful to have had a more detailed discussion of this method, or for additional information to be included in the table. What is appropriate may vary because a method is newer or is more of an outlier in a particular journal. It may require more explanation. Conveying that you talked to somebody with statistical expertise or different clinical expertise can help the editor know the value and the type of information that was garnered.

Heidi: Excellent. Thank you both for those replies. This is the next question. In the context of interdisciplinary work, there is often a dominant language or lexicon of the primary discipline associated with the journal. This can discourage authors from other disciplines from writing authentically in their own lexicon. When is a good time to open a dialogue about this with the journal?

Dr. Chloe Bird: I think you can attempt to open a dialogue with the journal, but it is unlikely that as one individual you are going to necessarily going to sway what is, as I was talking about earlier, an entire conversation. I have seen it done. In fact, one of my mentors wrote back and said this discipline was working on this and he wanted to include these things. Sometimes it flies and sometimes it does not. It is worth asking when you get your reviews back, or when you as a reviewer are reviewing something, and you feel like the process of shifting to the language of a different field outside your own or a discipline outside your own is coopting and underrepresenting the contribution of some work. I think it is entirely appropriate to say that you think more attention needs to be paid to the psychological or whatever literature this is built upon. That is not an uncommon kind of comment for somebody to make. Be specific enough that an author can act on it and address your concerns.

Heidi: Thank you. This is the final pending question that we have. how do you address the issue of, “slicing the salami too thinly,” in this day and age of large databases, where mutual publications are expected, but not planned \_\_\_\_\_ [01:04:01]?

Dr. Lori Bastian: I think that the first thing you need to do is, if you are slicing the data in a bunch of pieces, to make sure that you cite all those other pieces of salami in the manuscript, so that people can compare and determine. By people, I mean first the reviewers and editors. If it passes that, then it is other readers of the manuscript. They can compare what was done in a different \_\_\_\_\_ [01:04:38]. I think the big mistake that people make is not citing the other pieces that they have worked on. That, to me, is not a good thing to do.

Dr. Chloe Bird: All of them might be a lot, depending on what you are talking about. A tremendous amount of work has been done with the Women’s Health Initiative. It might be most important to cite some key pieces that lay out the study, and the pieces that are actually closest to it. The author ought to be comfortable saying, “These are the other two pieces that are closest to this, this is how it is different, and it does add enough novelty or enough of a contribution.” If as a reviewer, you feel like those are missing, then that is a comment I get and I take very seriously. I will go and look at the specific piece, or even before making decisions to send something out for review, there are tools for looking for the most similar manuscripts. Some things are sent back purely on not being unique enough. It is up to the author to make the case that this is a contribution and adds considerable or significant enough value to be an independent piece.

Heidi: Excellent. Thank you. Those are the final pending questions. I would like to give each of you an opportunity to make any concluding comments that you would like to.

Dr. Chloe Bird: Lori?

Dr. Lori Bastian: I would like to thank the audience for paying attention. We appreciate it. It was a joy to work with Chloe on this, and I appreciate the invitation to give the presentation.

Dr. Chloe Bird: The same here. As an editor, I just so appreciate the contribution that good reviewers make. You are highly valued. It is important to your own research and to the discipline as a whole. We could not do this without this kind of collaborative effort. I hope this is helpful in people learning something about what they can do and how they can do it, in order to carry out the responsibilities of a reviewer efficiently and effectively. Maybe it will also add some value as you pursue your own research and writing.

Heidi: Excellent. I too want to thank our audience for joining us. Of course, I would like to thank you two for lending your expertise to the field, and to \_\_\_\_\_ [01:07:06] for helping us coordinate this CDA cyberseminar series. For our attendees, once again, as you exit out of today’s session, wait just a second while the feedback survey populates on your screen. As I mentioned, we do read your responses very closely. It helps guide the direction our program goes into. Thanks again ladies, and everybody have a wonderful rest of the day.