The Peer Review System – Still No Alternative in Sight

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Innsbruck

This is my fourth Editorial as the Editor-in-Chief of International Archives of Allergy and Immunology. Again, I would like to take this opportunity to thank both my immediate collaborators in this task, i. e. the Managing Editor, the Editorial Board, and the efficient secretaries, both at the scientific secretariat in Innsbruck and the administrative office in Basel. The influx of manuscripts increased progressively over the last year, entailing a higher rejection rate than before. One of the most important aspects of editing a journal is, of course, the voluntary and efficient cooperation and donation of expertise and time of ad hoc reviewers. Their judgement forms the basis of the decisions made by the Associate Editors. I would like to thank all these reviewers, whose names are also listed in this issue as a token of our appreciation for their commitment to the journal.

On the administrative side, we have again been able to shorten the time from submission to publication but feel that this can still be improved. The main reason for occasional late publication is the slow processing of manuscripts due to repeated major revision. For the future, we have therefore decided to allow for only one major revision in order to provide faster processing. A rather annoying and unnecessary problem is the often poor quality of English in the manuscripts. Since this issue is completely independent of the scientific content, and since proofreading by a native English speaker should be possible anywhere in the world, it is hard to understand why appropriate precautions are not taken by authors who are confronted with this problem.

With respect to the scientific profile of our journal, we have further approached our goal of providing an adequate combination of allergologic and immunologic papers, again consisting of both theoretical contributions that are of interest for the clinically orientated reader and clinical papers that are also attractive to readers from the basic sciences.

Our Mini-Reviews, which are always written by experts in the field, have met with great enthusiasm, especially since we insist that they are really short and concise. Areas where further improvement is still necessary are the rather scant submissions of Case Reports and Images in Allergy and Immunology. The former need not just be well-worked-upon cases, possibly using new diagnostic or therapeutic approaches, but can also be descriptions of original and exciting examples that underline the aim of the journal, i.e. to demonstrate a link between theoretical and clinical allergology and immunology. With respect to the Images, pictures with short explanatory legends that might fulfill our criteria are, e. g., X ray photographs of unusual lung infections, histologic demonstrations of immunopathologic alterations or skin manifestations of allergic or parasitic diseases.

Furthermore, rather few authors take advantage of the possibilities to submit manuscripts for Rapid Publication. Such manuscripts must not only be short but should also contain very new and hot information that deserves fast-lane reviewing and publishing. I have also encountered

difficulties during the last year obtaining sponsors for our multicoloured cover page. As mentioned in previous editorials, I found it fun and challenging to select and compose these pictures that alternate in showing special aspects of allergology and immunology. Submission of potential front cover illustrations accompanied by the commitment of an appropriate sponsor from our readership would be very welcome. Finally, I would like to remind our authors that citing their papers that have appeared in International Archives of Allergy and Immunology not only boosts the journal but also increases their own impact.

Also, as the Editor-in-Chief, I do enjoy tremendously receiving my personal copy of the monthly issues and reading through each of them again.

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As discussed in my last Editorial, one of the very important pieces of the puzzle contributing to the quality and scope of a journal is the format of and philosophy behind citations in the reference list of each paper. The most important factor for the quality is, however, the reviewing process. The Editor-in-Chief of a journal has considerable power in shaping its content by the selection of the members of its Editorial Board and making the final decision about the fate of papers. If, upon assessment of a manuscript, the suggestion of an Associate Editor concerning acceptance or rejection is based on conflicting reviews, we get in touch with her/him in order to come to a joint final decision. In rare instances, the Editor-in-Chief may override the recommendation of an Associate Editor if he feels that the statement of a reviewer is either too short or does not comprehensibly support the decision from the author's viewpoint. I try to prevent reviewers rejecting papers simply on the basis of their personal views, direct or indirect competition or reiteration of conventional belief. The only basis for assessment of a manuscript by a reviewer should

be the originality, novelty and quality of the content of the paper and nothing else. Of course, a paper must also conform to the rules for submission to our journal (including those of the English language). This aspect, however, is never a major concern for the primary evaluation of a manuscript. The authors are always given the opportunity to improve e. g. the style and language of the manuscript, and – as mentioned above – this should not pose a major obstacle in any part of the world in 1996. Reviewers should not be censors but rather provide fair and constructive criticism that can be used to improve the paper, even if it is later submitted to a different journal. In nearly all instances, we receive very careful and responsible reviews that take into account the fact that a manuscript is written with 'heart blood' involving not only many hours of work but also the cooperation of patients, the lives of laboratory animals and many other important issues. Now and then, I do, of course, also have to read an openly hostile, arbitrary or hypercritical review which does not really help either in judging the quality of the manuscript or the author in possibly im-

proving it. In this instance, I usually start another reviewing process in close agreement with the original Associate Editor. So far, we have always found an in-house common denominator. It is also obvious to everybody active in our field that very rarely, if ever, will a scientific problem be completely solved to its roots. It is always easy to suggest further experiments but very often these would take another year or more. Therefore, unrealistic suggestions for extension of the submitted work will also not influence my decision with respect to the final fate of a manuscript. In principle, peer reviews should be written in a positive, friendly and collegiate attitude that

should also be reflected in appropriate wording not offending the author but rather encouraging her/him to accept the suggestions. Peer reviewing is thus perhaps the most important but also fragile component of the delicate network of modern science.

I do enjoy discussions with both our authors and editors and I would like to finish by thanking all of them for making my editorial life so exciting.

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