A Guide to Reviewing Manuscripts

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MCH professionals play an invaluable role by serving as peer-reviewers for their professional journal. The peer-review process is a fundamental part of maintaining the scientific rigor and professional relevance of our field’s literature. The purpose of this article is to provide guidance for the review of manuscripts submitted for publication to professional and scientific journals. In addition, a structure is proposed for undertaking a review and organizing the written response to the editor and the authors.

KEY WORDS: literature review; research; publishing.

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Maternal and Child Health (MCH) professionals are aided in their work and ongoing education by having available a professional journal dedicated to their field. Whether we are practitioners in federal, state and local agencies and organizations, academics and researchers in universities, or students preparing for future careers, a professional journal provides us a vehicle to: record our practice and research efforts, share what we have discovered about needs, risks, etiology, effectiveness, performance, etc., present ideas and hypotheses, propose new models, programs and policies, and, in all, document our collective contributions to the knowledge of the MCH profession and to the improvement of the health, safety, well-being and appropriate development of children and their families. The benefit of keeping a journal of our professional research and practice accomplishments is well-accepted. It supports continuing and graduate education and guides programmatic, policy and research development. It is therefore in the interests of the entire MCH community that we work to assure that our journal maintains a high level of professional quality. This entails a joint effort on the part of the journal editors, the authors of submitted manuscripts and, most importantly, the reviewers of those manuscripts.

The MCH professional plays an invaluable role by serving as a peer-reviewer for his or her professional journal. The far-reaching impact and importance of this function can not be overstated. Foremost, the peer-review process is a fundamental part of our efforts to maintain our journal’s scientific rigor, to limit personal bias in the selection of contributions for publication, and to ensure that the articles selected have professional relevance. In this regard, the use of reviewers from the full range of the MCH field is essential. Whether the reviewer is a faculty member, a state or local practitioner, or a student, their insights and points of view are valuable and make a significant contribution toward improving the MCH literature. Moreover, reviewing the research of others lays a foundation for improving one’s own research skills, as it entails the critical appraisal of a wide range of potential scientific concerns, including variable measurement issues, study design, statistical analysis, and ethics. The concerns considered by reviewers are those faced by each author. Accordingly, reviewing manuscripts provides the training to write manuscripts and to continually improve their quality.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE REVIEWER

Reviewing manuscripts submitted for publication to a professional/scientific journal in one’s
field involves responsibilities to both the profession/field/journal and to the authors of the manuscripts. By agreeing to review a manuscript, the reviewer assumes the obligation to the field to maintain and improve the quality and scientific rigor of the profession’s journal, to consider the interests and backgrounds of the readership, and to undertake the task in a timely, thorough and ethical manner. To the authors of the submitted manuscript, there is an obligation to provide an unbiased opinion, to offer constructive comments, to be honest in the case of a rejection, to clearly explain concerns, and to treat the manuscript in a confidential manner.

The ageless adage, “do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” nicely summarizes the key aspects of the responsibilities of reviewers. Emulating the type of reviewer that you would want to both maintain the quality of your journal and constructively review your own work is a good starting point for developing a reviewing style. Given that many articles represent months or even years of work, the decisions to be made by reviewers are serious. A recommendation for rejection should be accompanied by information that will help the authors both understand the basis for rejection and gain useful insights about how to improve their work. Similarly, recommendations for acceptance should be based on the scientific and professional merits of the submission and suggestions for modifications should encourage and guide the author towards even better scholarship. Meeting these responsibilities takes time and commitment and reflects the reviewer’s dedication to their colleagues and to the development of their field of research and practice.

**STRUCTURAL APPROACH FOR REVIEWING**

The purpose of this article is to provide guidance for the review of manuscripts submitted for publication to professional and scientific journals. In addition, a structure is proposed for undertaking a review and organizing the written response to the editor and the authors. It should be noted that there are many available workshops and published guides for reviewers (1–7) Most of these contain similar information and there is no single preferred approach.

The remainder of this article is organized around the format and traditional sections of most research manuscripts: Introduction, Methods/Data, Results and Discussion. For each section of the manuscript under review, key issues are identified for the reviewer to consider. To the extent that these issues are addressed well in the manuscript, brief comments to that effect can be made in the written response to the author. When the reviewer feels that these issues are not well addressed, they should be specifically noted with a request that the author respond to the concern and modify the manuscript as needed.

The written response of the reviewer to the author can be divided into two main sections. The first section contains general comments about the manuscript as a whole. Such comments about the study may focus on its: 1) relevance and importance to the field, 2) interest to the readership and multiple disciplines, and 3) originality of topic, data and methods. Additional comments can be offered about the: 1) length of the manuscript, e.g., is it too long and wordy, 2) the organization of the material, and 3) the grammar and style. The second section of the review should offer specific comments, which can be organized by section, taking the same format as the manuscript. Here, manuscript page and paragraph numbers can be given to identify phrases, tables or figures that are in question.

**THE INTRODUCTION**

The introduction of a manuscript should provide an indication of the general problem that the article addresses. This overview of the problem should concisely make evident why this topic of study is important to the field and the readership. Typically, authors describe what populations and numbers of cases are involved and highlight rates, costs, potential for spread, or long-term consequences in order to establish the magnitude of the problem and the specific focus of the research. The data and highlights from previous research should be referenced and existing theories, controversies and unresolved issues discussed. Finally, the study purpose, i.e., what the study hopes to accomplish, should be stated, along with specific study hypotheses. At the least, the following should be given in the Introduction:

- A clear and succinct statement of the problem and its relevance;
- Essential background data and information and germane references to place the study in context and to establish its importance; and,