
EDITORIAL

Building sites for science

Scientific journals bring researchers' findings to their colleagues and other audiences, mediate advances in methodology, and facilitate understanding by dialogue. Differences of opinion can be talked through and mistakes clarified. In some fields, these debates take place rapidly, on the net or in weekly publications. Quarterly journals, such as this, discuss at a slower pace.

Active readers sending letters to a journal can signal success or failure. When letters question ideas presented by previous writers, disagreement can clear the way to higher understanding. However, a letter can also point out serious mistakes that have bypassed reviewers' and editors' scrutiny. In the field of health technology assessment where most studies apply multiple methodologies, we're far from being infallible.

Editing a journal is like organizing a construction site. The Editorial Board houses our necessary experts like building sites have their core team of masons, carpenters, and cleaners. Electricians and painters are needed at a certain time, like tinkers for the roof. One carpenter is perhaps trained in tinkering as well, and a particular epidemiologist may be great at statistics.

Building and publishing both have their set schedules. Timeliness and good quality are expected, although a week has only so many working hours. Unlike construction workers, reviewers are not paid for this core task of all scientific communities. Often the editorial board works quickly—even within hours!—sometimes they're busy and propose colleagues to do the job instead.

Manuscripts sent to IJTAHC are typically evaluated by two referees. The authors, on the other hand, may represent several different research disciplines: statistics, epidemiology, health economics, ethics, and so on - not to mention the numerous fields within medicine and allied health sciences. Over the years, this journal has published assessments relevant to all major medical specialties and most

subspecialties. Referees with multiple skills are in great demand.

Widening Circle of Referees

The number of manuscripts to IJTAHC is increasing, so more referees are needed. Authors should not wait too long for decisions, and they benefit from multiple reviewers as each statement provides valuable scientific feedback. Reviewing educates scholars at both ends, when review statements and editorial decisions are shared among those who participated in the process.

At the dawn of this journal and its host organization, health technology assessment was a novel discipline. The editorial board now spans dozens of experts on all continents. Organic renewal has replaced emeritus members by new talents, but there is a limit to the size of a board. A new solution is called for.

Side by side with IJTAHC and HTAi, the international network of agencies for health technology assessment (IN-AHTA) has grown to maturity, with 46 member agencies in 26 countries. A natural way of recruiting new referees, then, is to invite each agency to appoint a liaison person for the journal. These would ideally be senior scientists with good links to methodological as well as clinical experts in their country. A wider network will allow more referees per article when needed.

Web-Based Submission Starts

Refereeing will soon become technically easier for current and new referees alike. The Web-based system for submitting and reviewing manuscripts for IJTAHC will be opened on the journal homepage during the summer. The software is used by a number of medical journals already, so we expect an easy transition—late adopters for any technology enjoy smoother introductions than pioneers.

Editorial

Especially authors will benefit from the clear, nimble processes. From the editorial viewpoint, following the stream of submissions is straightforward. The change from manual editing will also apply to manuscripts first submitted by email which are still awaiting results from the review or being revised. Authors will be able to download revised versions or resubmit over the Web.

To expedite reviewing, it is necessary to select for the review process only manuscripts that would fit in the scope of the journal. To secure that this screening happens rapidly and fairly, the editorial structure will be strengthened by appointing associate editors. Theme editors will continue to be invited for special sections. The journal team, with wide

expertise and strong links to the health technology assessment community, will keep this science construction site alive and well.

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