

Guarding the Record: The Widening Burden on the Medical Journal Editor

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The work of a medical journal editor is commonly imagined as the selection of good papers from a pile of submissions. That description is comfortable, and it is wrong. The editor's actual charge is custodianship of a permanent record on which clinicians will base decisions about patients, and on which other researchers will build. Selection is only the visible part of it. Beneath sits an expanding set of obligations: ethical, technical, legal and administrative, that has grown considerably faster than the resources available to meet it. The gap between what editors are now expected to guarantee and what they are actually equipped to do is, in my view, the central problem in scholarly publishing today, and it is felt most acutely by institutional journals in low- and middle-income countries.

The reviewer is the binding constraint

No difficulty is more persistent than securing competent peer review. Submission volumes have risen steadily worldwide while the reviewer pool has not, and the burden falls disproportionately on a small minority of researchers who accept most of the invitations others decline.⁴ Editors experience this as a slow attrition: invitations unanswered, acceptances followed by silence, and reviews that arrive as a set of numerical ratings with a single line of comment. A score is not a review. It tells an author nothing about what to fix and tells an editor nothing that would justify a decision.

For a national or institutional journal the constraint is sharper still. The pool of specialists in a given sub-discipline may be small enough that matching a manuscript to genuine subject expertise, while simultaneously avoiding institutional overlap and personal conflict of interest, becomes an exercise in scarcity management. The temptation is to return to the same willing colleagues. Doing so is understandable and it is also corrosive, because independence of assessment is precisely the value peer review is supposed to add. The defensible answer is not to pretend the constraint does not exist but to widen the pool deliberately — recruiting beyond the parent institution, beyond the city, and where the subject permits, beyond the country — and to hold to a written rule about how often any one reviewer may be used.

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Independence within one's own institution

Journals owned by teaching institutions carry a structural tension that rarely receives frank discussion. The editor is an employee of the institution whose faculty supply a substantial share of the submissions, and those faculty include senior colleagues, heads of department and, on occasion, the editor's own administrative superiors. Editorial independence in that setting is not an abstraction. It is the concrete capacity to reject a manuscript written by a person who influences one's professional life, and to do so on the record.

This capacity does not survive on goodwill. It requires written delegation of final editorial authority to the editor, an explicit recusal rule for any editor with a competing interest, and an insistence that manuscripts from within the institution receive at least one fully external reviewer.^{1,2} Where these safeguards are absent, the journal may still publish sound work, but it cannot demonstrate that it does — and in scholarly publishing the demonstration is a substantial part of the value.³

Integrity Under Incentive Pressure

Academic promotion in many systems is tied to a count of publications. The predictable consequence is a supply of manuscripts shaped by the requirements of a promotion committee rather than by a research question: work divided into the smallest publishable units, authorship extended as a courtesy, and in the worst cases text, data or images that are not the authors' own. Editors are now expected to detect fabricated data, manipulated images, undisclosed duplicate submission and the products of organised paper mills,⁶ largely without forensic training and often without access to the software that larger publishers deploy routinely.

The same incentive structure sustains predatory publishing, which continues to attract inexperienced authors precisely because it promises speed and certainty where legitimate journals offer neither.⁵ An editor's obligation here extends beyond guarding the journal's own pages to educating the institution's authors about what a credible journal looks like — a task that belongs in postgraduate training and rarely appears there.

Generative Artificial Intelligence

Large language models have introduced a difficulty that is genuinely new, and it cuts in two directions. Manuscripts now arrive containing text, and sometimes references, produced by generative tools without declaration. Detection software is unreliable in both directions, and an accusation founded on a detector's

output is not defensible. At the same time, some reviewers have begun to delegate their reports to the same tools, which converts peer review into an exchange of machine-generated prose and breaches the confidentiality of the manuscript by uploading it to a third-party service.

The consensus position is clear on the narrow question: a chatbot cannot satisfy the criteria for authorship, because it cannot take responsibility for the work.^{8,9} The wider question — what constitutes legitimate assistance, and how it should be disclosed is still settling. Editors nonetheless have to publish a policy now, apply it consistently, and revise it as the evidence matures. Governing an unsettled area without waiting for certainty is an uncomfortable but unavoidable part of the office.

Responsibility after publication

Publication is not the end of the editorial obligation. Retractions have risen sharply, exceeding ten thousand in a single year,⁷ and while some of that increase reflects better detection rather than worse conduct, it establishes an expectation that journals will act on credible concerns about work they have already published. Editors must therefore maintain a graded response: a correction where an error does not disturb the findings, an expression of concern where evidence remains incomplete while an inquiry proceeds, and a retraction where the findings can no longer be relied upon.^{10,11}

It is worth stating plainly that a journal willing to correct its own record is demonstrating strength rather than admitting weakness. The notice should state its reason objectively, identify who issued it, link permanently in both directions to the article concerned, and leave the original accessible and clearly marked. The record is preserved, not erased.

The Unrecognized Office

Underlying all of the above is a resource problem that is seldom named. Editorial work in most institutional journals is unpaid, performed after clinical and teaching duties, and counts for little in promotion. Few editors receive formal preparation for the role; competencies for scientific editors have been defined by consensus but are rarely taught anywhere in the medical curriculum.³ Meanwhile institutions expect their journals to secure national recognition and international indexing, each of which demands sustained administrative compliance, accurate metadata, functioning identifiers, published policies, documented decisions, that consumes editorial time without producing anything an outside observer would recognise as scholarly output.

What Would Help?

None of these difficulties is solved by exhortation. What changes outcomes is investment and structure: recognising editorial service in promotion criteria; funding at minimum one trained editorial officer; building and maintaining a reviewer database that

extends well beyond the parent institution; developing reviewers through structured training rather than assuming competence; publishing policies on authorship, conflicts, corrections and artificial intelligence before they are needed; and keeping a decision record complete enough to withstand external scrutiny.^{1,2,12}

The editor's product is not a set of articles. It is trust — the reasonable confidence of a reader that what appears in these pages has been assessed honestly, corrected when wrong, and recorded permanently. That confidence is slow to accumulate and quick to lose, and it rests on work that is largely invisible when it is done well. Recognising the burden is the first step towards distributing it.

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