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Guidelines and questionnaire for reviewers (*Archive of Oncology*)

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The best reviewers concentrate on offering useful advice to authors rather than giving summary judgments to editors.

Sandra Goldbeck-Wood

Selecting peer reviewers who will provide high-quality reviews is a crucial task of editors of biomedical journals. However, defining the responsibilities of reviewers, identifying qualified reviewers for particular manuscripts, insuring that reviewers complete their work on time and finding a way to reward them are critical components of editorship (1).

Little is known about the quality assessment of peer review process. It is generally accepted that peer review helps editors to make difficult decisions about which manuscript and in what form to publish (3). Nevertheless, most journals do not have standardized methods of selecting reviewers, nor do they screen or train them (2).

In accordance with the principles of Good Scientific Practice (GSP) and recommendations of international associations of biomedical journals editors (ICMJE, WAME), editorial board of the *Archive of Oncology* accepted a practice to apply guidelines and questionnaire for reviewers.

Guidelines contain suggestions for reviewers how to evaluate a manuscript helping them to fulfill their dual responsibility - to prepare constructive comments for authors and to advise the editors (3).

Archive of Oncology has been applying the questionnaire since

volume four. During the time, it was learned that questionnaire did not give information on all essential aspects of good review. Since volume nine, the questionnaire was replaced by new one with array of questions that give more complete impression of manuscript quality. The mentioned questionnaire was taken over from *Stomatološki Glasnik Srbije* and adopted for the need of our journal (4).

As the aim of the *Archive of Oncology* is to direct the reviewers to essential elements of a good review (making technical part of the review process as easy as possible), the editorial board has decided to prepare new guidelines and questionnaire for reviewers following recommendations of the international associations of biomedical journals editors and respectable medical journals (1,5).

New guidelines consist of three parts:

- a. The letter for reviewer in which we kindly ask him/her to review the manuscript and also give a brief explanation of the policy of the review process;
- b. The questionnaire form that contains:
 - Short guidelines explaining the review process with notice about a date of reply;
 - A confidential part of review containing quality assessment of the manuscript, overall decision on acceptance or rejection and comments for the editor with frank account of the strengths and weaknesses of the manuscript;
 - A part of review for authors contains comments on each part of the manuscript with annotations given according to page and paragraph;
- c. Declaration of competing interest.

Archive of Oncology peer reviews all the material it receives.

Reviewers are, by definition, advisors to authors and editors. The most important responsibility of reviewers is to evaluate manuscript critically but constructively and to prepare comments about the research and the manuscript that will help authors to improve their work and the editor to make final decision. It is necessary to point out that the editors mostly pay attention to the reviewers' recommendations regarding the acceptance or rejection.

Abbreviations:

ICMJE - International Committee of Biomedical Journals Editors;

WAME - World Association of Medical Editors

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tion of manuscript, but the editor must be the one who makes the final decisions.

The primary goal of the review is to assess the quality of the manuscript contents and to recommend how to improve it. The reviewer evaluates and assesses the originality and importance of the research, the design and methods of the study, the interpretation of the data, the strengths of the conclusions and the overall quality of the manuscript. In the new questionnaire, these characteristics of the manuscript are graded by a six-point scale.

The reviewer has to prepare comments to the editor regarding the suitability of the manuscript for publication in the journal. The comments should explain in detail reviewer's recommendation regarding acceptance or rejection of the manuscript.

The editorial of the *Archive of Oncology* accepted a system of "double blinded review" which means that neither authors know the identity of reviewers nor the reviewers know the identity of authors. The reviewers are obliged to consider the manuscript as a confidential document and have to assess it promptly - according to the terms given in guidelines. The reviewer should point out both good and weak sides of the manuscript. Comments about the manuscript should not be derogatory, but if reviewers do make such comments, the editor may choose to edit the comments or even withhold them from the authors.

The review process is time-consuming and often a thankless task, and it is hard to reward reviewers for their work. What do the editorials usually do to encourage reviewers to continue to review for the journal? *Archive of Oncology* rewards its reviewers by the acknowledgement of their reviewing efforts, which is printed in the last issue of the given year, and also offers a free subscription to the journal for the next year.

Only a few journals pay their reviewers.

Important ethical question in connection with the review process is to avoid any potential competing interest (conflict of interest). New guidelines contain a declaration of competing interest in which we primarily insist on a financial interest but another sort of competing interests are also specified (personal, religious, political, or others). If the reviewers assess that a competing interest might appear or already exists in respect to the authors or the contents of a manuscript, they should declare that to the editor. The editor does not have to exclude such a reviewer from the review process.

New guidelines and questionnaire for the reviewers should contribute to higher quality review that will cover all essential elements of good review: the originality, importance, design, and detailed interpretation of a study with references from within and outside the manuscript (3,6). The review should also contain specific and useful comments on results presentation but above all, the review should be constructive.

Appendix: Questionnaire for reviewers of the *Archive of Oncology*

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Form page 1

Manuscript No: _____

First author: _____

Reviewer No: _____

MANUSCRIPT REVIEW (for Editors only)

A. QUALITY ASSESSMENT

For each question, please use the following scale of answer: "To which extent does the article meet this criterion"

- | | | | |
|---|----------------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| 1 | Fails to a great extent | Succeeds to a small extent | 4 |
| 2 | Fails to a moderate extent | Succeeds to a moderate extent | 5 |
| 3 | Fails to a small extent | Succeeds to a large extent | 6 |
| | | NA Not applicable | |

For all papers:

- The paper is important and adds enough to existing knowledge 1 2 3 4 5 6 NA
- The paper is read well and makes sense 1 2 3 4 5 6 NA

For research papers:

- The issue discussed in this article is worthy of investigation 1 2 3 4 5 6 NA
- Presented information is new 1 2 3 4 5 6 NA
- The most important previous studies have been cited 1 2 3 4 5 6 NA
- The hypothesis is clearly defined 1 2 3 4 5 6 NA
- The overall design is appropriate 1 2 3 4 5 6 NA
- Participants studied are adequately described and their conditions defined 1 2 3 4 5 6 NA
- Methods are described specifically enough to be evaluated (for randomized trial CONSORT style was followed) 1 2 3 4 5 6 NA
- The results clearly answered the research question 1 2 3 4 5 6 NA
- Interpretation and conclusions are warranted by and derived from the data 1 2 3 4 5 6 NA
- References are relevant up to date and without glaring omissions 1 2 3 4 5 6 NA
- Abstract accurately reflects the contents of the paper 1 2 3 4 5 6 NA

Total score

Please, use your discretion about the list when reporting on other types of paper.

B. OVERALL DECISION (please tick)

Reject Major Revision Minor Revision Accept

C. COMMENTS FOR EDITORS:

Please give a brief and frank account of the strengths and weaknesses of the manuscript (use additional sheet if necessary).

If you think the manuscript needs major revision, would you like to see it again? Yes No

Signature of the reviewer: _____ Date: _____

For office use only:

Sent out: _____ Expected: _____ Received: _____



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Form page 2

COMMENTS FOR AUTHORS:

Please group your remarks into major and minor comments with annotations given accordingly to page and paragraph (use additional sheet if necessary).

Please do not sign your comments!