

Hangings at the *bmj*: What editors discuss when deciding to accept or reject research papers

by Elise Langdon-Neuner

Editors at the *bmj* (*British Medical Journal*) gather every Thursday to meet as a hanging committee. An invitation to sit in on such a meeting is too good to be missed. But we are not talking here of gallows, word games, or even Nebraska Football, but rather decisions on the fate of manuscripts that have passed through the journal's external review process. The *bmj* itself likens the meetings to those held at art galleries to select paintings to be hung in the gallery.

I was very grateful for the opportunity to attend one of these meetings, also known as manuscript meetings. I wanted to know what editors at such a prestigious journal with a high rejection rate (see Box below) discuss when making publication decisions. What are and what are not important factors in influencing their decisions to accept or reject manuscripts for publication? Expectations of something formal and stuffy were quickly dispelled. Nevertheless coffee and biscuits, and the casual and convivial atmosphere, belied the unwavering focus and impressive professionalism that marked the meeting's seamless progress.

First I should explain how things work at the *bmj*. All original research manuscripts received by the *bmj* on one day are reviewed by the handling editor on duty for that day. About 12 research manuscripts are received a day. As the abstract is the first point of reference and an average of 7 minutes or even less is spent on the initial scan of each manuscript and covering letter, authors are well advised to heed the *bmj*'s advice on their webpage to 'ensure that the abstract is as complete, accurate, and clear as possible'. Special attention is paid to the aims and methods parts of the structured abstracts; the results are considered less important, i.e., it matters less if these are positive or negative. If the abstract is of interest, the editor next looks at the methods section of the manuscript before deciding whether to reject the paper or pass it on to the screening editor on duty for that day. The screening editor decides whether the

manuscript should be sent out for external review. If it is decided that the manuscript is worthy of external review, the screening editor sends it back to the handling editor who is responsible for selecting reviewers and conducting the process through to the final decision. The handling editor presents the paper and the reviewers' comments at the manuscript meeting. Between six and eight editors attend the meetings. At the meeting I was at, one external editor joined by telephone from the US. Sometimes there are more. A statistician, who like the rest of the participants has read all the papers to be discussed, is also in attendance and takes a very active part.

Naturally the discussions at the meetings are strictly confidential. The following report of the meeting I attended is a composite of the dialogue to demonstrate the type of points that were raised but does not relate the discussion of any particular paper.

The first manuscript was a survey, which the handling editor presented as a 'novel and titillating study'. It was not ideal, but it was the best that was available on the topic. The editors thought the paper was possibly worth publishing—but was the sample representative? In any event the discussion needed to be shortened because it pretended to be more than it was and the study limitations should be explained. In discussion of subsequent papers, the statistician warned on two occasions that studies were underpowered. One of these papers had an uncommon design and was thought to be better for a specialist journal, although had it been a definitive study it might have been of interest to the *bmj*'s specialist readers. In another study, the follow-up was not long enough. Here the editors resolved to send a message to the authors that they would be interested to see the study again with a longer follow-up in a couple of years' time. There was a risk of losing the paper in the meantime, of course.

One resubmission and one appeal numbered amongst the manuscripts discussed. Appeals are encouraged by the *bmj*. On the resubmission the editors felt that the authors had done a good job in giving very detailed responses to the reviewers' comments and supplying supplementary files. They had redone some of the analyses but the paper could have been written better. The editors decided to ask for a revision. The appeal paper had originally been rejected because of concerns about the power of the study, and the authors had not presented 95% CIs for the main result. It had been thought that the non-significant *p* value could have arisen from high variance rather than a small effect.

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Rate of rejection

The *bmj* received around 7000 manuscripts in 2007. Approximately 3300 of these were research papers, of which 147 were accepted for publication (acceptance rate 4.45%). About 60% of the research papers received were rejected within 2 weeks of receipt (often on the day of submission) without being sent out for external review.

>>> **Hangings at the *bmj*...**

By the time a manuscript reaches the manuscript meeting there is a strong will among the editors towards acceptance, but at this meeting a large study that tackled a poignant disease was rejected. Although the study had been carefully conducted and was well reported, there was a question about its clinical usefulness. The results were unsurprising and did not really produce new knowledge. Another problem was that it had been database-driven rather than hypothesis-generated. Moreover, the reviewers had raised issues that were intrinsic to the study and therefore could not be addressed by making changes to the manuscript.

Then there was a trial that had not been blinded, but probably this would have been impossible anyway. Many patients had previously had the therapy, so they were not newly diagnosed patients, but this did not come over very clearly. Such a limitation should be reflected in the abstract and the title. The authors had some ties with manufacturers, but there wasn't thought to be any spin. Another paper reported on a field in which there are strongly opposing views and lots of conflicts of interest. One researcher had declined to review the paper because he did not think he could give an open review¹ without damaging his relations with the authors. Conflict-of-interest statements had been provided, but the editors thought this was a case where the paper should include a statement explaining which company made each of the drugs mentioned.

Some time was spent discussing a study that raised an important research question but the study also had quite a few problems. The method of randomisation had not been described and the power calculation was hard to disentangle. Only secondary outcomes were presented in the abstract, tables and figures. Buried somewhere in the text was the fact that the primary outcome had been non-significant. Usually articles are not sent out for review before the authors have submitted a CONSORT statement and the protocol and clinical trials registry numbers, but somehow this paper had slipped through the net and these were missing. The greater than 50% reduction in XXXX associated with the study medication could be regarded with some scepticism, and the editors wondered if this could really be sustained in the long term. They decided to ask for the missing documents and offer revision to resolve these problems. If the paper was eventually published it was agreed that one of the editors should write a commentary on the statistical aspects of the paper to be published with the paper. Often when research articles are accepted they are published accompanied by an editorial.

The final paper for discussion posed a nice question and was intrinsically interesting. Little data had been published on the topic and a publication would be read and cited. One editor commented that it was something where you wanted the results to be true. The author had phoned before submission to ask if the *bmj* would be interested in the paper,

which was an unusual one for the journal. The paper was discussed as a possible candidate for the Christmas issue, which includes topics that are not normally covered in the *bmj*. The paper needed a lot of work before it could be accepted, for example: was the question in the survey asked in the right way? If the methods were explained better it might be acceptable. The editors had the will to get a decent paper out of it, but decided that they should send it out for review again for another opinion.

Finally, what were the editors at this meeting looking for?

- sound science and statistics (the outcome of a clinical trial could be positive or negative)
- new information
- papers that would be read and cited
- papers that were well written—although if other criteria are met the *bmj* will work with authors to produce a good paper (that said, well-written papers always make a good impression).

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Language revisers/translators/editors: is there anyone out there?

We—Christine Møller in Copenhagen and Monika Schoell in Regensburg— have for many years been revising and editing manuscripts for Danish and German scientists. This led us, independently of each other, to compile lectures on typical errors of grammar and usage made by non-native English speakers. We focused not only on language problems but also on cultural differences, and then naturally progressed to structure and style.

There are many PhD students and researchers in Denmark and Germany who need help with writing manuscripts for publication.

We would like to contact other language revisers/translators/editors with an interest in the problems experienced by non-native English speakers. Any members of EMWA who would like to exchange information and ideas are urged to get in touch with us.

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¹ The *bmj* have a policy of open review. The names of reviewers are included on the reviewers' comments sent to the authors.