



A reviewer's joys and dilemmas

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This presentation is based on experiences from having been referee more or less regularly for the last ten years. The papers that I have been asked to review have mostly been related to the area of craniofacial growth submitted to the following journals: *Acta Odontologica Scandinavica*, *American Journal of Orthodontics and Dentofacial Orthopedics*, *The Angle Orthodontist*, *European Journal of Orthodontics*, *European Journal of Oral Science*.

The joys and dilemmas in being involved as a referee in the process of publishing have two facets, interaction with the Editor and the review task in itself. At this unique conference, in the front of a number of distinguished editors I will take the opportunity in first place to focus on my opinions about editor-referee interaction.

When the first contact is made by the editor, what kind of information do I need in order to make up my mind whether I am able to accept being a referee? Certainly I want to have access to the article, preferably in full text, but at least a structured summary. The title would not give sufficient information for me to judge whether I feel comfortable with the task. I do not want to know who the authors are neither do I want them to know who has been the referee of their paper. It would be valuable to know any additional referees and their field of expertise. Knowing the time schedule is important, and if I am unavailable to do the job, it would be good to know if I am allowed to offer the job to some of my colleagues. Information about possible return of the submitted to material would avoid later awkward situations with regard to "lost material".

After I have finished my job, in response to the editor, I would be interested to know what happened to the paper and what were the comments given by other referees. So far, one editor of the above mentioned journals has given me opportunity to read the author's response to my comments. I learn a lot from the author's reply and actions taken to meet my comments. It gives me valuable feedback about the quality of my

work. I would recommend this procedure as common praxis among all editors.

Then, some general thoughts about the joys and dilemmas of the review process itself.

The first dilemma is to address the standard question in the review forms. How to assess the importance of a study. This is a much more complex task than that of quality assessment. Nobody knows what might become important in the future. The commonly used division of papers into original research, studies that give valuable confirmation of earlier results, and studies that repeat already known results has only limited use, since there are papers reporting negative findings, case reports, review papers, methodological studies and papers presenting, new controversial hypotheses. Among these categories of papers there might be real pearls. Unfortunately, these categories of manuscripts are prone to be rejected or advised to be submitted to other journals.

Another standard question is whether the paper is of interest for the readers of this journal. I think this question should not be addressed to the referees at all. Nobody can be a more qualified assessor on this matter than the editor himself. Likewise, I do not as a reviewer want to be a final judge for recommending publishing or not. On the other hand, I do hope my comments and criticism are clear enough for the editor to make up his mind about this.

Finally some general often repeated weaknesses in the articles I have reviewed over the years. The introduction section does not focus enough on the aim of the study. Many authors tend to scatter the background knowledge, which confuses the reader. The reader loses the interest long before the authors present the aims. An introduction should not aim at educating the reader to much, rather it should point on the reasons why the author had an interest in conducting the study.

A number of studies suffer from the weakness, that the material has been collected when purpose of the study still was unclear or for a completely other purposes



than those presented in the study.

The material to be presented in the results and discussion sections are often mixed. In order to strengthen the evidence of the findings often additional results appear in the discussion section. For instance, by referring to new variables that probably have been measured initially, however, for some reason excluded from the description of the material and methods.

Few authors check the contents of the reference literature carefully enough. It is embarrassing to notice how particularly the discussion sections of other authors can be twisted to suit own conclusions. There

is also a tendency to use "second generation" references, instead of digging to the original which would give credit to the author it actually should belong.

In spite of the dilemmas, there is plenty of joy in being a reviewer. I feel I am doing an important job to improve the quality of the journal I work for and even more importantly, I can contribute as an anonymous advisor, to the progress of an author's career. The process of refereeing should optimally promote constructive learning. A priceless reward for my undertaking is the opportunity to remain at the edge of the science.