LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Peer accreditation and payment: A hand-in-hand solution to the peer crisis

La acreditación y el pago de los pares: medidas complementarias en respuesta a la crisis de la revisión por pares

Dear Editor,

Candal-Pedreira et al. candidly discussed the challenges faced by peer review and the responsibilities of editors in ensuring that the peer-reviewed label is truthful.1 They elaborate on the professionalization of peer reviewers. Their professional backgrounds and experience, either as researchers or as peer reviewers, vary widely.2 Yet, as Candal-Pedreira et al. noted, no international system of professionalization and accreditation exists. Coupled with the mostly voluntary (i.e., unremernerative) nature of the peer review process, a broad range of peer reviewers of varying qualifications are entrusted with screening and approving the bulk of scientific knowledge in the most important scientific databases (e.g., PubMed, Web of Science, Scopus), and since the process is mostly not open, peer reviewers cannot be held directly accountable.

Rather than the suggestion made by Candal-Pedreira et al. to appoint the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and/or the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) as the bodies responsible for establishing an international accreditation system for peer review, I propose an independent body of scientists take on the task of peer review training in order to make the balance of peer review-related power and fortune fair and equitable. The envisioned International Peer Review Accreditation Board (IPRAB) would have at least three specialists per research field to lead the accreditation course, which should include three components: 1) a thorough examination of each candidate’s background and an evaluation to determine whether their curriculum vitae is truthful, validated and updated;2 2) a comprehensive course offering training on basic aspects of what to expect in peer review, specific aspects of different manuscript types that peer reviewers should examine thoroughly, the ability to detect fraud and fake or manipulated aspects of scientific papers and language and communication skills to allow reviewers to communicate their ideas cordially and professionally; 3) a test involving both a legitimate paper and a hypothetical paper in which flaws, manipulations and errors are purposefully introduced to allow the candidate to assess valid and fictitious content. The test would be completed in real time and on camera to preclude cheating.

Based on 1–3, candidates would then be assigned a score and classified accordingly into categories A to F, where A stands for the highest level of accreditation. Combined with open peer review and a bold approach to the reform of journal quality control systems,4 this proposal—which, evidently, needs to be fleshed out to resolve many particulars—could give rise to a peer pool that has been trained, tested and properly accredited. To ensure that IPRAB-accredited peer reviewers are continuously appraised, a new test would need to be taken annually. Accreditation could also be lost. Journals should avoid using non-IPRAB-accredited peer reviewers. An annual open report could be published by the journal showing the number and ranks of IPRAB-accredited peer reviewers that it employed. Depending on the journal’s business model, it would pay a nominal annual fee to IPRAB (i.e., post-service payment) that would be proportional to the number and rank of accredited peers, which would allow the accreditation body to be sustainable, ensuring a balanced peer-editor-journal-publisher interaction.

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