Peer reviewing papers for the BJGP

Background

The BJGP receives well over 600 original research papers each year and slightly more than 20% of these are published in a paper-short/web long format. About one-third are rejected prior to review for a variety of reasons including but not limited to: inappropriate subject matter or format; weaker methodology (such as audits or rare case reports, and very superficial surveys); or because they lack novelty or are of very local or limited relevance.

We send the remaining papers to at least two reviewers, chosen from a database of over 1500 reviewers, including over 90 statistical experts, held in our manuscript handling system. The database provides information on the number of reviews each reviewer has undertaken, the date of the last review and an (internal) indication of the overall quality of previous reviews. We now have a system to provide feedback to reviewers on the quality of their reviews.

Further reviewers may be sought when, for example, there is serious discordance between the first two reviewers and it is difficult to make an editorial decision, when there is an evident need for additional expert statistical or specialist input to the review process and, sometimes, when a review is inadequate, and does not provide sufficient information to make a useful contribution to the editorial decision.

The BJGP operates a system of **open peer review**, in which the identity of the author(s) of the paper is known to the reviewer, and the reviewers themselves are asked to sign their reviews. We no longer offer the option of anonymity for peer reviewers. Historically, less than 1% of our reviewers opted to remain anonymous. There is some evidence that open peer review leads to less gratuitously unkind or unnecessarily critical comments that could be passed on to authors, and generates more positive, constructive suggestions for the improvement of manuscripts. The value of the peer review comments in helping authors to revise and resubmit is often acknowledged by our authors.

The choice of reviewers is made by the Editor or Associate Editors. The reviewers' database is sub-classified in a variety of ways which enable reviewers with particular expertise to be identified, and also enables a choice to be made between subject expertise and methodological expertise. This can be an important distinction in the assessment of quality, relevance, and interest – subject experts can sometimes be over-enthusiastic about papers which fall into

their area of particular interest, so that experts in the relevant research methodology may provide a more objective, balanced view. Conversely, subject expertise is essential to be sure about the novelty, relevance, and applicability of research findings, and generalist reviewers have a further, important role to play in reflecting the interests of an important segment of the BJGP readership – practising clinicians without a particular academic or research interest.

The reviewer's tasks

The BJGP asks its reviewers to provide their reports within 2 weeks – this is important in order to deliver a good service to our authors – and there is an element of self interest in it too, because, of course, many of our reviewers are, themselves, authors.

We ask reviewers to do three things. One is to provide, a reasonably **detailed analysis of the strengths and weaknesses** of the paper, providing sufficient detail to justify their recommendation on acceptance or not, and to provide the authors with sufficiently clear and detailed guidance on how the paper might be revised for resubmission to the BJGP or for submission to another journal if necessary.

Second, we ask the reviewer to choose from a list of **recommendations on acceptance** – selected from Yes definitely, Yes possibly, Probably not, and Definitely not. We ask for this assessment to be made in relation to the likely quality/acceptability of the paper if it is revised along the lines that the reviewer suggests.

Finally, we ask for any **confidential comments to the Editor** which might affect the editorial decision, and which they do not wish to be seen by the authors. These might include, for example, concerns about duplicate publication or an undisclosed conflict of interest, or about the security of the data collected, or sometimes a more negative comment, arguing against acceptance, than they would like to include in the comments to authors if they do not wish to opt for anonymity.

Comments to authors

Although it may be a pleasant way of starting, it isn't necessary to thank the Journal for the opportunity to review the paper, or to write out the title of the paper and list the authors. This certainly isn't the place to say whether or not the paper should or should not be published. It is perfectly okay to launch straight into the report which should be structured as follows:

A.   General comments and overall impression. It is very helpful to the Editor to know how strong the reviewer thinks the paper is and how relevant, fresh, and original is its message and the strength of its likely interest and impact as a BJGP paper. Some reviewers mention likely citeability here.

B.   Major points, including strengths as well as weaknesses. Major negative points here should represent the main reasons for recommending rejection or the need for major revision. Major positive points will relate to:

* the importance or timeliness of the paper
* the novelty of the research question being asked
* the quality and appropriateness of the research methodology used to address it
* the security of data collection
* the robustness, appropriateness, and depth of analysis
* the intellectual quality and comprehensiveness of the discussion
* a candid account of the limitations as well as the strengths of the study
* an appreciation of its standing in relation to the relevant literature and current research in the field
* a clear and succinct statement of the implications for research and practice

C.   Minor points: these can include anything from presentational matters such as the size and content of tables and figures, pointing out typos, inappropriate use of acronyms, or the misuse of certain terminology, to somewhat more substantive criticisms of the organisation of material, the quality of writing and grammar, the adequacy of the background review, and the choice and extent of references. In writing this section it is particularly helpful to both the Editors and authors to indicate the lines and/or sections of the manuscript to which these comments refer. We do not recommend using tracked changes to make comments directly on the manuscript itself.

These minor points are welcome and help improve the quality of the manuscript. All accepted papers will go through a thorough copy editing and proofreading process before publication of the final version.

While we try to check carefully any potential conflicts of interest that might bias or otherwise affect the trustworthiness of the study, we are also grateful to reviewers for their scrutiny of the acknowledgments and competing interests declarations at the end of each paper, and the statement about ethical committee approval.

We do not require reviewers to 'sign off' with a general comment about the quality of the paper and, in particular, **we do not want to them to write comments about whether or not, and under what circumstances, the paper might be acceptable for publication**. This can cause difficulties and confusion with authors as the final editorial decision on acceptance is made on a number of factors by the editorial team and their assessment of the manuscript, not limited to the peer review.

Recommendation on publication

There are four choices, and the chosen recommendation should be used in the context of the potential for a revised version of the paper to be acceptable for publication. The 'Definitely not' and 'Probably not' recommendations are, of

course, unlikely to result in the submission of a revised version, but the 'Yes possibly' and 'Yes definitely' categories are likely to be associated with manuscript revision, so that these should be chosen with that in mind. Occasionally there is a mismatch between this categorical recommendation and the tenor of the comments to authors, and if the reviewer recognises it may be helpful to add an explanatory note in the confidential comments to the Editor section.

Confidential comments to the Editor

This box should be used sparingly – most of the reviewers' comments should be suitable for transmitting on to the authors. However, there are occasional circumstances under which the reviewer may wish to make certain comments that, understandably, need to remain confidential. These include serious concerns about originality, duplicate publication, fraud, plagiarism, and any other form of research misconduct which the reviewer may have, often through knowledge of either the research group concerned or the research area.

Some reviewers, quite appropriately, use this box to offer to write an editorial on the research topic, should the paper be accepted. It is not helpful to include detailed methodological comments in this box, because these properly belong in the Comments to Authors section of the report.

General comments

When writing a review quality is not determined directly by length, but, with few exceptions, a reasonably substantial critique is needed to be useful to the Editor and the authors. As a general guide, the most useful reviews run to somewhere in the region of 30 to 60 lines of text in the Comments to Authors box, perhaps supplemented by one or two suggestions for additional references. Very long reviews are not only sometimes difficult for Editors to get to grips with, they can also be daunting for authors who are required to make numerous revisions. It is particularly helpful, in a complex review, to identify the precise sentences and sections of the paper in which specific revisions are required, rather than leaving too much to the authors' imagination. General exhortations to 'tighten up the writing' or to 'cut the introduction by half' can be difficult to operationalise.

Reviewers should also be mindful that authors have to remain within the word count and that may be a limitation to expansion of the manuscript in all areas.

Conflict of interest of reviewers

Our reviewers' database has limited mechanisms to identify potential conflicts of interest, and institutional or other conflicts may not be easily identified by the Editor before sending the paper out to review. We do, therefore, depend to a

considerable extent on reviewers recognising potential conflicts of interest and letting us know before undertaking their review.

Conflict of interest exists when reviewers and authors are working in the same department or institution, or are collaborators on other research projects. However, it is almost inevitable that researchers in a particular field have some knowledge of cognate research being conducted elsewhere and this clearly has the potential for conflict through, for example, incentives to be more or less positive about the paper in order to increase another group's chance of earlier publication. Sometimes a reviewer is concerned about revealing their identity to an author with whom they have worked in the past or may wish to approach in the future about employment or research collaboration. Our advice under these circumstances is that if, for any of these or other reasons, a potential reviewer feels constrained or in any way inhibited about giving an unbiased, honest, and balanced account of their views about the paper, then they should let us know and we will, generally, suggest that another reviewer is chosen. From time to time simple reassurance from the Editor of the inevitability of some knowledge of the research being reported is all that is required.

After the review

Fairly soon after the reviews have been received at the BJGP office – we aim for a turnaround time of 4-6 weeks between submission and an initial decision – an editorial decision on rejection or provisional acceptance is made (original papers are almost never accepted without some revision). The decision letter sent to the corresponding author is based on a template but is modified for each paper as necessary. As well as appending all reviewers' reports, providing an opportunity for reviewers to compare their views with others', the Editor may make additional comments which can include criticisms or suggestions of their own, or an explanation of the reasons behind rejection when, for example, the reviews were reasonably positive. Such decisions are often based on available space in the Journal, fit with other material, and sometimes on the recent submission of a similar, better paper.

Editing of peer reviews

Comments to the Authors are not normally edited before being sent to the author but there are some circumstances where the Editor may act. Where a review contains unacceptable language or tone, the Editor may choose to annotate the review themselves. These clearly identified annotations will provide guidance for the authors. The Editor also reserves the right to edit or delete unacceptable portions of the review, but this will, wherever possible, be done in consultation with the reviewer.

Reviewers providing unacceptable comments will be removed from the database.

Credit for reviewing

We publish an annual 'thank you' list of the year's reviewers. We also can and do provide certification that recognises the work done on reviewing for us. This can be used for evidence of continuing professional development and for appraisal and revalidation purposes.

Reviewer feedback

We now have a system to provide feedback to reviewers on the quality of their reviews and the Editor is happy to provide narrative feedback to reviewers on their reviews, up to twice a year, on request (email: journal@rcgp.org.uk). The grading criteria are as follows:

Timeliness
3 – Review was on time
2 – Review was slightly delayed
1 – Review was severely delayed

Quality Assessment
3 – Review was highly relevant
2 – Review was sufficient
1 – Review was below average

BJGP has partnered with Web of Science Reviewer Recognition Service (formerly Publons) to enable reviewers to track, verify, and showcase their peer review work. When submitting a review for BJGP, reviewers will be asked to opt in to WoSRRS. Through WoSRRS reviewers can effortlessly maintain a single, verified record of all their reviewing and editorial activity for any of the world's journals.