

EDITORIAL

## **A Salute to Our Reviewers: Partners in the Scientific Endeavour**

It has become a tradition at *CJNR*, in the final issue of each volume, to publish the names of those who have served as reviewers during the preceding year, as a way of publicly acknowledging their vital contribution to the Journal. We think of our reviewers as partners. As editors we rely heavily on their assessments and evaluations in our deliberations on what will be published in the pages of *CJNR*. This means that we share responsibility with our reviewers for what appears in print. We draw on their expertise to assess the conceptual basis and scientific merit of a research study and to ensure the integrity of what we publish. The feedback and direction that their critiques provide us and our authors lead to improved manuscripts. As we have stated in *CJNR*'s editorial pages over the years, through their comments to editors and authors, reviewers make essential contributions to the development of science, particularly nursing science.

In recent years there has been much debate about the strengths and weaknesses of the peer-review system, including examination of the costs and benefits to the individuals concerned and a search for alternative methods of assessment. This is a subject that has been reviewed and revisited continually (e.g., British Academy, 2007). While members of a number of disciplines have critiqued peer review and pointed out its flaws, no one has been able to come up with a better model for assessing quality. Warts and all, peer review remains the “gold” standard for judging the quality of scholarly work and a fundamental characteristic of scholarly journals, distinguishing them from other means of publishing research. But this standard can be upheld only if reviewers possess the knowledge and experience needed to expertly and fairly critique and judge the quality of a research study.

The peer-review system fulfils the same function for the scientific community and its consumers that Health Canada does for the food industry: When it works, it is one of the best ways to safeguard the research consumer and the public against insufficiently documented or even fraudulent results and against research practices that can endanger public health and undermine the public trust.

Thus a well-functioning peer-review process ranks at the top of the list of components that are critical to a journal's success. When Dr. Gottlieb assumed the editorship of *CJNR* 15 years ago, the Journal had but a handful of reviewers on its roster. Few of these were doctorally prepared and the quality of their reviews tended to be uneven, reflecting the state of the Canadian nursing research community at the beginning of the 1990s. Very early on, the editorial staff realized that the future of *CJNR* and its quality were directly related to the quality of the reviews. With the assistance of leaders in nursing academia and practice across the country and around the world, we extended our reviewer base. As submissions to *CJNR* have grown more specialized and more sophisticated, we have also come to draw, when appropriate, on the expertise of methodology and content specialists outside of nursing. Systems have been put in place, at the initiative of former Associate Editor Dr. Anita Gagnon, to ensure continued improvement in the quality of reviews. These have included orientation packages for new reviewers and feedback to reviewers, most recently in the form of sharing each reviewer's comments with the other reviewers. Currently we have an army of more than 350 reviewers upon whom we can call, and each year we extend invitations to many additional ones.

### **Caveat Lector**

In recent years there has been growing concern within the scientific community about published studies that purport to be scientific but have not been peer reviewed. This situation has come about with the exponential increase in online publishing and in the number of journals that purport to be peer reviewed but in reality are not. In October 2007 the watchdog of biomedical publishing, the Worldwide Association of Medical Editors (WAME), issued a policy statement defining what constitutes a peer-reviewed journal: "To be considered peer reviewed, a journal must obtain *external reviews* for the *majority of manuscripts* it publishes including all original research and review articles... To be considered peer review, a manuscript should have been reviewed by at least one external reviewer: it is typical to have *two reviewers* and sometimes more [whose] opinions are sought" ([www.WAME.org/resources/policies#definition](http://www.WAME.org/resources/policies#definition); italics ours). *CJNR* meets and even exceeds all of these criteria.

We are well aware of the costs to the researcher of submitting to a peer-reviewed journal: the time-consuming nature of the process and uncertainty about the outcome. The researcher may need to resubmit a paper several times, or even to submit it to several journals, before it is ultimately accepted. Both junior and senior investigators can be tempted,

for the sake of expediency or for other, less noble, reasons (arrogance, desperation, etc.), to choose non-peer-review means of disseminating their findings as final results (rather than as preliminary or speculative results). Certainly, different avenues are suitable for different types of work, or work in different phases of refinement. However, it is exceedingly rare that a serious scholarly work intended for wide consumption will leave its author's desk free of errors and omissions. Such a manuscript only stands to benefit from a second, a third, or even an eighth pair of eyes before being exposed to a broad audience. These additional pairs of eyes are what the peer-review system offers.

In nursing and in other fields, we have come to see that while all interesting ideas, well-written manuscripts, or provocative presentations are worthy of attention, those that have withstood the test of peer review occupy a special place. Sophisticated consumers of scholarship (whether or not they conduct research or write papers themselves) consider the source of any research or scholarly work — ignoring only the poorest and most flimsily documented work — basing their confidence in a particular study or paper partially on whether it appears in a publication that uses rigorous peer review. While most will agree that peer review is important, serious difficulties arise when a journal (or one of its authors) uses the label “peer reviewed” when the selection process does not meet the WAME criteria outlined above. When the term is misused, readers attempting to place the findings in context, or to assess the productivity of the researcher and the heft of his or her research program, are at a marked disadvantage — one could even say that they are at risk of being gravely misled.

There is a flip side to the problem of misinformation about just what kind of review a manuscript has undergone. It is unwise to assume that an article is free of shortcomings and mistakes in research design or in the reporting or interpretation of findings merely because it appears in a journal with a stringent peer-review process such as *CJNR*. At *CJNR* we aim to publish any manuscript that advances nursing or the health sciences, particularly if it has important implications for the Canadian context (this is becoming more of a challenge as the quantity and quality of submissions increase). We also make every attempt to ensure that the peer-review process is completed in a timely manner. We believe that, while no study is perfect, some value can be found in any manuscript as long as it is driven by an understanding of the basics of the research process and honest reporting and has stood the test of critical external review. So, while the peer-review and editorial processes are among our best means of identifying sound findings and valid, balanced conclusions, peer review cannot substitute for readers' critical reflection and healthy

scepticism. Peer review is a complement of, not a substitute for, vigorous and fair discussion about the correct interpretation of findings, especially when controversial issues, such as patient well-being, are on the line. And peer review of individual studies is only one part of the first phase of reaching a scientific understanding of a phenomenon or a treatment approach — such an understanding occurs far into a chain of scientific effort, once a critical mass of studies has appeared and has undergone careful systematic review. Still, every journey begins with a first step, and peer review of each new piece of the puzzle is a critical part of that first step.

### **Reciprocity and the Community of Researchers**

Do we find it difficult to find reviewers? We feel blessed to have reviewers who are committed to *CJNR* and to the advancement of nursing science. They are gracious and generous with their time, willing to share their talents and expertise. Generally, our reviewers make every attempt to comply with our requests and to submit their critiques within 4 weeks. When they decline, it is usually at the start or end of a semester or when grant-submission deadlines loom and time is at a premium. They tend to do so with apologies and great regret. On the whole, our relationship with reviewers has been extremely positive. We appreciate our good fortune, particularly in light of reports that many journal editors experience difficulty securing reviewers. Some journals have had to scale back the peer-review process (making do with fewer reviewers, asking reviewers for less extensive analyses, and conducting more reviews in house). Others have resorted to paying their reviewers, a practice more prevalent in for-profit publishing houses, which factor this into the cost of producing their journals.

Our reviewers, and those who review for other scholarly journals, subscribe to an ethos of sharing: They are willing to give of their time and knowledge because they know this is the right thing to do for the community of scholars and readers. They have bought into a system whereby, in exchange for having their own work reviewed, they give in kind. Also, they intuitively accept the unwritten rule of reciprocity that enables the peer-review system to function: The review process is part of the informal mentoring that we all receive throughout our careers; when we reach a point where we can give back, we do so.

All in all, there is much evidence that the partnership among authors, reviewers, and editors, which functions in a spirit of promoting and developing excellence, is running smoothly at *CJNR*. The majority of the original research submissions we receive represent good-faith efforts to produce sound work. We receive few complaints about unfair

or biased reviews and often receive expressions of genuine gratitude towards our reviewers. Revisions are submitted on time and rarely fail to address reviewers' comments and concerns. The vast majority of reviews are insightful, specific, and diplomatic. More often than not, they are exceptionally thorough, obviously the result of much time and effort. Reviewer satisfaction with the process also appears to be high, with reviewers nearly always agreeing to repeat assignments. Most importantly, we hear from readers, and see for ourselves, that the research contributions are more sophisticated and impressive with each successive volume of the Journal. This is not only a reflection of the maturation of the Canadian nursing research community, but also a tribute to our reviewers.

Our reviewers have invested heavily in *CJNR*, and the editors, authors, consumers, and the public are enjoying the dividends. May this vital partnership continue to grow stronger with each successive volume.

**Laurie N. Gottlieb, Editor-in-Chief**  
**Sean P. Clarke, Associate Editor**

### **Reference**

British Academy. (2007). *Peer review: The challenge for humanities and social science: A British Academy report*. London: Quattro.