

Nurse Author & Editor™



A Newsletter for Nurse Authors, Reviewers, and Editors

Manuscript Development

On Ethical Peer Review and Publication:

The importance of professional conduct and communication

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We often hear the overused but unfortunately true adage "Don't eat our young" in reference to how seasoned nurses sometimes act toward their inexperienced counterparts. In a similar vein, reviewers and editors need to be considerate, professional, and ethical in their treatment of and interactions with both novice and experienced authors.

The point of this article is to serve as a reminder of the importance of professional and ethical behavior on the part of editors and reviewers. Based on my limited experience, I believe that editors and reviewers generally act in the best interests of authors. Their critiques reflect thoughtful consideration and aim to assist, not sabotage, aspiring writers. Over the past several years, the vast majority of editors with whom I've had contact have been very helpful and willing to offer guidance and direction to promote the development and improvement of manuscripts. However, sometimes the communication authors receive from those who review their manuscripts and make editorial decisions is less than supportive. Following are some nurse authors' accounts that illustrate the need for those involved in the evaluation and publication process to commit to and maintain a professional and ethical standard of conduct.

Good, Bad, and Unexpected Experiences

I recall as a doctoral student my intense desire to publish an article in a peer-reviewed journal. The very first article that I submitted received reviews ranging from poor to good. No written comments were offered by one of the reviewers, whose response consisted of simply drawing an inclusive elongated circle around the lowest possible ratings for all review criteria. According to this reviewer's assessment, my manuscript was essentially worthless. I have not received a review like this since. Thankfully, with the encouragement of a mentor, I decided to disregard this extremely negative and underdeveloped assessment of my work and focused on the helpful feedback of the other reviewers. One reviewer, who acknowledged the value of the topic and its potential for publication, recommended that I resubmit the article to a better suited specialty journal. This advice was worthwhile as the manuscript was eventually accepted.

With the encouragement of an editor, I invested more than two years on revising a manuscript. The third revision was returned to me with minor suggestions, and the editor informed me that just a few more edits were needed before the article could be published. I carefully attended to the reviewers' feedback only

to receive a rejection letter about three months later. The rejection letter raised a whole new set of concerns that previously had not been mentioned. I phoned the editor who explained that although she appreciated my efforts, the reviewers decided that the manuscript was not publishable. The paper was promptly submitted to and published by another journal. Since then, I have managed to publish several articles.

More recently, in reply to a query letter, another editor asked me if I had ever published any articles. I thought this was a rather odd question. Had I responded no, would the editor then have advised me not to submit my manuscript? Another situation involved the rejection of an opinion article that I had written because the reviewers did not agree with my views on a controversial issue. This same article was subsequently published by another journal.

Others whom I have talked with about the challenges and rewards of writing for publication have shared similar troubling experiences. For example, a colleague of mine received the good news that, upon initial submission, her article had been accepted for publication by a premier research journal. She received positive written feedback from all of the peer reviewers and the highest possible scores on all evaluative criteria. Several months went by and the article was not published. This was understandable—sometimes it may take up to a year or two for articles to make it to print. More than two years later, her article still was not published. She contacted the editor and was told that the journal had appointed another editor. The new editor determined that the previously accepted article was no longer of interest and would not be published. Of course, my colleague was greatly disappointed. She updated the literature review and attempted to publish the manuscript elsewhere. After a couple of rejection letters, she put the manuscript aside and decided not to pursue it further.

Another colleague was encouraged by her dissertation committee chairper-

son to pursue publication of her doctoral thesis. With the assistance of her chair, she wrote and rewrote her manuscript and submitted it to a well-known nursing research journal. The only direct communication that she received from the editor was an acknowledgment that her paper had been received. She e-mailed the editor, called the office, and wrote a formal letter, but never received a definitive answer about the status of her manuscript over an almost two-year period. Finally, she wrote to the editor and requested that the submitted paper be returned and, though disheartened, began the publication process with another journal. Similarly, another nurse author told me that one of her manuscripts had been accepted for publication and then, months later, rejected by another editor. On the phone and in writing she told the editor of the need to address this situation from a professional and ethical standpoint. The decision to reject the previously accepted paper was reversed and the article was ultimately published.

Insights and Thoughts to Consider

Giving voice to the sometimes less than positive experiences of nurse authors as described in this article may heighten awareness about potential problems and strengthen the review and publication process. Objectivity, constructive rather than destructive criticism, and ethical and fair treatment are integral to effective working relationships between editors, reviewers, and authors. Communication is vitally important, whether the message be negative or positive. To move forward in the development of good writing and pursuit of scholarship, nurse authors must be treated with respect and helped along the way to experience success. In contrast to the reviewer whose evaluation of my first article was limited to an inclusive circling of the lowest possible ratings, most reviewers will at least offer some beneficial analysis.

Even when submissions are not accepted, reviewers should aim to improve

manuscripts by providing constructive feedback (Hojat, Gonnella, & Caelleigh, 2003). Burnard and Hannigan (2001) reported that when reviewers identified themselves to the author their remarks were more constructive and they were more likely to recommend acceptance of manuscripts. On the other hand, with their anonymity protected, reviewers were often highly critical, demeaning, and less than encouraging. I'm not recommending the elimination of blind peer review, just reasonable balance. The goal for reviewers should be to assist in the development of budding nurse authors rather than humiliating them and potentially creating a case of persistent writer's block. As reviewer for a few journals, I am mindful of the need to provide instructive written comments, particularly when I find some components of the manuscript to be lacking.

It's my understanding that the code for reviewers and editors is to be objective and to avoid injecting personal opinion when evaluating manuscripts. When reviewers and editors make decisions based on theoretical preferences and personal ideology, the integrity of the review process is compromised (Hojat, et al., 2003). Price and Dake (2002) offer useful ethical guidelines for reviewers and editors. They highlight the importance of avoiding bias and reviewing a manuscript on the merits of its content, not based on one's personal level of interest in the topic. Also, to facilitate ethical and professional behavior, editors need to respond to authors within a reasonable timeframe (Price & Dake, 2002). It can be hoped that the authorship experiences of some of my colleagues do not reflect conventional practice.

Furthermore, once a decision has been made to accept a manuscript, editors must hold to their decisions. Like the example of the author who contested the decision to reject her previously accepted article, authors need to respectfully assert themselves when they believe that editors or reviewers have treated them unfairly or in an unprofessional fashion. This can be a daunting proposition, especially for

beginning authors, as they are in the vulnerable position of being dependent on decisions made by reviewers and editors. Authors must avoid allowing their manuscripts to linger for an inordinate amount of time before publication decisions are made or before in-press manuscripts are scheduled for a specific publication date. Because of the experiences of my two colleagues whose manuscripts had been accepted and later rejected, I was a bit anxious when notified about the resignation of an editor of a journal that had already accepted two of my manuscripts. I contacted the outgoing editor who assured me that my "in-press" articles remained slated for future publication.

Summary

Editors and reviewers provide an invaluable service to the nursing profession and are key to the promotion of nursing scholarship, open inquiry uncensored by opinion or bias, and further development of nursing's body of knowledge. By being accessible and promoting an effective, constructive review process, editors serve not only the nurses who write for them, but also their respective journals and readership. Authors deserve and expect professional and ethical behavior from peer reviewers and those in leadership who make final judgments about the publication status of their manuscripts.

Author Background

Hila J. Spear, RN, PhD, is a Professor of Nursing and Director of Graduate Studies at Liberty University, located in Lynchburg, Virginia. She published her first peer-reviewed article in 2001. To date, she has published over 25 articles, most of them in peer-reviewed journals, and is currently a reviewer for the *European Journal of Public Health*, *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, and *Medical Science Monitor Journal*. She continues active involvement in publication about professional development issues and research related to adolescent pregnancy, childbearing, and health behavior. You may email her at hspear@liberty.edu.