

Within the Black Box—The Journal's Editorial Philosophy

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Approximately 25 years ago as I prepared my first manuscript for submission to a scientific journal, the entire publication process seemed to be a complex slow-moving “black box”. A manuscript was typed on plain white paper (no word processors at that time!) and was sent by mail along with 3-4 copies to an editor's office. Six to eight weeks later, a response was obtained with either a request for revisions or a rejection. There was little information provided as to what criteria the journal editor used to make a decision or the role the reviewers played in the decision making process. Many months later an accepted paper would appear in print. Identification of a paper required a laborious search through bound versions of the Index Medicus. A quarter century has now passed, and there have been significant changes in scientific publication. For most journals, submission is now done electronically which has greatly accelerated the review process. In many cases, accepted papers are immediately posted on the web for use by the medical and scientific community. After “official” print publication, papers can be easily identified using efficient computerized search engines such as PubMed or Ovid and then downloaded for personal use. All of these changes have greatly expanded the availability of medical and scientific knowledge to both practitioners and scientists alike. What has not changed is the mystery surrounding the review and decision making process.

As the editor of a scientific journal, it is my responsibility to determine its contents. As the first editor of the *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine*, I believe that it is important to have a consistent editorial philosophy and to have this articulated to reviewers, contributors, and readers alike. This should help diminish the uncertainty that underlies the editorial process. First, as I have previously stated, the focus of *Journal* will be clinical sleep medicine. Its emphasis will be the publication of papers with direct applicability and/or relevance to clinical practice. Although the scope of “clinical sleep medicine” will be interpreted liberally, some submissions may be declined because the Associate Editors or myself do not feel that they are relevant to the focus of the *Journal*. Second, decisions regarding publication will be made with the bias that all submissions have heuristic value. Thus, the purpose of the review process will be to show why a paper should not be published or has trivial value to the readership. In contrast, many scientific journals have the philosophy that it is the authors' responsibility to demonstrate why publication is indicated. Third, reviewers are consultants to the Editors. Although their opinion greatly assists the Editors in determining whether or not to publish, the final decision is the purview of the Associate Editors or myself. Factors incorporat-

ed into this decision include importance and novelty of the findings, scientific methodology, priority relative to other submissions and interest to the readership. Thus, it is possible that a paper accepted for publication may not have “perfect” scientific methodology, but in the opinion of the Editors, contains an interesting or important message for the readership or scientific community. Conversely, a paper without any scientific flaws may be rejected because it is not novel or does not have any clinical importance.

Finally, I would like to address our manuscript submission process. The *Journal* is using a web-based electronic submission system. Although this has greatly accelerated manuscript processing, it is not without occasional errors or idiosyncrasies. In particular, we apologize if inappropriate “reminder” messages are sent to reviewers. We are working to make the system better and we appreciate your forbearance.

A scientific journal's success is in large part related to the participation of its readership. In the months to come, I welcome your suggestions as “our” journal develops and matures.