Editorial

ARE HUMAN PEER REVIEWERS STILL THE BEDROCK OF SCIENTIFIC PUBLICATIONS?

Authors, peer reviewers, and editors all contribute to scientific publications. The bedrock of academic publications are peer reviewers. They voluntary contribute by using their expertise to provide constructive comments to authors in terms of possible gaps in methodology, for example, and they also issue reports as to the way forward for the editors: accept, reject, or recommend revisions. There is consensus in the literature that the process of peer review is complex and time-consuming.[1-3] However, there are concerns in terms of bias, and fairness.[1] Nonetheless it does provide an opportunity for authors to obtain feedback in terms of the merit of their research and identified errors and flaws, which need to be corrected. The majority of peer reviewers have high workloads, which due to advances in information and communication technologies, have led to them being expected to reduce the turn-around time of their academic commitments.[2] Put differently the digital era has resulted in an increased pressure on those that also act as peer reviewers of academic publications. To some extent their workload has decreased; there is software to check for plagiarism and accessing cited references. Jackson et al[2] are of the opinion that with an ever increasing workload experienced peer-reviewers may opt out of the process. They argue that to address a possible dearth of experts there is a need for potential reviewers to be mentored and trained. Their argument is in keeping with that of Benos et al[1] as they proposed the implementation of an international on-line programme in order to accredit potential reviewers.

The use of artificial intelligence is gaining ground in most professions. This has led to a debate on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) by authors, reviewers, and editors of scientific publications.[3] One needs to carefully consider the ethics of using generative AI by all involved in scientific publications. Leung et al[4] underscore that this has become a serious concern. They recommend that there should be regulations of the use of AI and large language models (LLMs) by all involved in scientific publishing. According to them elaboration of research questions can be done using generative AI as well as generating text in scientific language, and also the provision of output data. They advise authors to consider that generative AI may have been used in publications therefore they need to fact-check content. They also point out that over the decades humans have provided peer review reports, but they could also now decide to reduce their workload by means of generative AI. The same applies to the editorial process. Given the ethical concerns of the use of AI in scientific publication, the editorial board of this journal will, within the next few months, issue policies on the use generative AI, for example, by authors, peer reviewers, and the editorial processing of submitted manuscripts.

Overall there is a need for transparency by all involved with respect to legal and privacy issues in research involving humans in terms of the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki. Peer reviewers, or the editors of this journal do check that authors provide details of ethical approval in their manuscripts when studies involve humans.

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