PEER REVIEW MANAGEMENT
IN THE ELECTRONIC AGE

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The manuscript management softwares have now taken deep roots in the medical journalism. The switch over from 'pen & paper editors' to 'electronic editors' has swiftly occurred. A whole generation of charismatic 'e-editors' is now increasingly visible. The 'pen & paper editors' have either converted completely to 'e-editors' or they have included versatile 'e-editors' in their teams. This switch over has made managing an editorial office workflow tremendously easy. The main features of this fabulous comfort are more organized, fluent, standardized, 'trackable', reliable, sharable and easily transferrable solutions for routine tasks of editorial office. In addition, the editors can now manage their office 24/7 from anywhere at their convenience[1].

The major task of an editor rotates around manuscript management. The manuscript management softwares have made this cumbersome process very organized and standardized. The emails are automatically generated, deadlines notified and the reminders sent. The authors, the reviewers and the editors receive messages at every step of the peer review process making the task very systematic[2].

In this 'e-atmosphere' of extreme 'e-praise', I want to highlight a few 'e-problems' for medical journalism that I have noticed during this 'e-conversion' of peer review management. Some of my observations may appear 'out of date' and even cynical, however it would be great to initiate a discussion on this issue and hear to expert opinions before classifying these 'e-problems' related to dependence on the manuscript management softwares.

Theoretically it is easier to sit on a laptop or hand held and send an article for review (on the part of editors) or quickly suggest a correction (on the part of reviewers) or make an amendment (on the part of authors). However, it is associated with a few problems as well. I would like to discuss them as increased workload for editors; increased reliance on software; and increased pressure on reviewers[3].

The science fiction stories, four decades ago, used to tell story of a time (in future then!) where everything was automatic, people had remotes in hands, robots in offices and homes, everything was done automatically by pressing buttons, there was nothing much to do, life was very comfortable, however it lacked emotions. Now when we are actually living in that 'once science fiction' era, everything is true except for one, and that is the work has not decreased, it has tremendously increased.

This is true for impact of electronic manuscript management systems as well. On the part of authors writing an article, typing it, printing it and sending it by post used to be a snail paced task. On the part of the editors reading the manuscripts, deciding reviewers, sending to reviewers, reminders to reviewers, reading the reviewer comments, editing the comments, sending them to authors all used to be a slow cumbersome work. Likewise reviewers took their time and the authors took ages to make corrections. Now with manuscript management systems this all can be done at an electric pace. But wait a minute has it made the life of editor comfortable? I don't think so.

Those who used to take ages in 'writing-typing-printing-posting cycle' can now quickly type and send a manuscript. This has led to an 'increased number of manuscripts'. Those who cared for words can now go on typing, resulting in submission of 'massive manuscripts'. 'Cut and paste plagiarism' knowingly or unknowingly has increased a lot. Those who were slow to respond to recommendations of reviewers, sit on their hand held on the same day that they receive corrections, correct them and send them back. This has led to queues of 'accepted articles in waiting' in most journals.

This overload has affected the editors who used to read the comments of reviewer and corrections by authors word by word. Editors who were once capable

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of taking intelligent decisions, many of them have started functioning merely as a 'post office', just receiving and forwarding. This will gradually bring down the quality of journals. There is an increased reliance on electronic management systems. An important part of an editor's job is to review the reviewers' comments, authors' replies and authors' amendments. However it has been noticed that 'e- Editors' are increasingly forgetting to review and edit reviewers' observations. Many have already started just forwarding the comments of Reviewer-1, Reviewer-2 and Reviewer-3 to the authors. There are many incidents where 'insulting remarks' from some 'irritated reviewer' were forwarded as such to the authors leading to uncomfortable situation. Likewise there have been instances where disagreement of author to the comments of reviewer was forwarded as such to the reviewers. The reason for this is an unjustified dependence on electronic management system[4].

Editors have a natural tendency to give more time to 'minor or major corrections' suggested. They overlook (or trust reviewers) if the report is straight 'accept' or 'reject'. The rule of thumb for the editors is this that if reviewer recommends an article for 'acceptance' or 'rejection' they must give a justification for that. Without proper justification there is no question of a straight acceptance or straight rejection. With increased reliance on 'manuscript management system' the editors are exceedingly forgetting about this major responsibility.

I want to remind that editor is not just a post office. An editor is the reviewer-in-chief, chief justice, solution finder, mentor and guide. It is editor's duty to help the authors understand comments of reviewers. It is the editor who takes decisions on disputes between reviewer and author. Asking an author to 'Correct the references according to Vancouver style' is an automated response. Guiding the author to 'please check such and such website for proper Vancouver style of referencing and in case of problem please consult your librarian' is a humane response.

A 'Reviewer' is the biggest asset of any journal. The electronic solutions have increased pressure on the reviewers as well. The biggest problem with any automatic system is lack of emotions. 'Pen & Paper Editors' used to go to any extent to keep reviewers happy. They knew that reviewers are tied to their journal by a very loose knot. The deadlines for reviewers used to be very 'humane' and more 'reviewer friendly' than 'editor friendly'. The editors used to create flexible deadlines based on the schedules of the worthy reviewers. On the contrary now the reviewers feel that they are up against not a human, but just 'an automatic email system', that is inflexible and has a potential to declare them incompliant to deadlines without caring for their genuine reasons for delays. Let me tell you, we are experiencing more reviewer noncompliance and drop out in this era than before. Many of reviewers feel uncomfortable at receiving a blunt system generated email. I squarely blame this on the attitude of editors and not on the software. For me it is not the gun, it is the man behind the gun. We are losing many good reviewers who are very occupied by replacing 'human contact' with 'e-contact'. My suggestion is that the editors must keep a 'non-automated' human and humane link with their reviewers like before.

Let us, the editors, the reviewers and the authors get together to identify these problems to rectify them in order to prevent conversion of 'editor's office to a 'post office'.

The author is one of the founding members of EMAME and a keen advocate for adapting automated manuscript management systems, but not at the cost of 'editorial skills'.

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