

Reviewing Policy

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Introduction and background

Purpose of this document

This document sets out the principles and processes underlying the policy of the Journal of Bioethical Inquiry (JBI) with respect to reviewing of manuscripts for the information of editors, reviewers, authors and readers.

The concept of peer review

Peer reviewers are individuals invited by editors to assist them in the decision making process by providing assessments of written material submitted to the JBI for publication. The objective of the reviewing process is to facilitate the development and publication of high quality material in the JBI. Reviewers are selected on the basis of their expertise, special knowledge or experience relevant to the manuscript under assessment.

Role and purpose of reviews

The reviewing process should aim to facilitate publication of high quality articles

The overall purpose of the reviewing process is to facilitate publication of high quality articles. This means that reviews should where possible provide constructive guidance and feedback to authors with a view to assisting them in the development and refinement of their work. Ultimately, decisions will be made by the editors about whether particular manuscripts should or should not be published. However, it is not the only role of the reviewing process to assess whether a piece of work meets a particular standard.

Reviews should help authors improve or develop their manuscripts

One of the aims of the JBI is to foster new work in a range of disciplinary fields relevant to ethics and bioethics. The JBI therefore seeks to provide support for authors new to the field of bioethics as well as for established authors working in new disciplinary areas. It is one of the explicit and overt purposes of the reviewing process to provide advice and assistance to authors to help them improve and develop their manuscripts.

Reviews should provide guidance for the editors

Final decisions about publication are the province of the JBI's editors, not reviewers. Editors may rely on reviews for guidance and for informing their correspondence with authors.

Editorial decisions about manuscripts must take into account a range of issues, including the nature and objectives of the JBI and the importance, originality, clarity, timeliness and potential impact of the manuscript, including its potential social impact and contribution. The assessment of some of these criteria may be facilitated by information provided in the reviewing process.

Empirical studies, including those with negative results despite adequate power and studies of a conceptual nature, should receive equal consideration.

Reviewer selection

Introduction

In principle, an editor may solicit as many reviews of a manuscript as is needed to provide the author with useful feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of the paper and how it might be developed or improved. The editor then engages in dialogue or correspondence with the author(s) as appropriate, with a view to developing the manuscript further. Ultimately, the editor provides the Editor-in-Chief with an informed recommendation that a manuscript either be published in an original or revised form or be rejected.

In practice, two reviews are sufficient in most cases, but editors are free to seek out additional reviewers where it is felt that additional expertise could be helpful. In their choice of reviewers, editors should be guided by the stated aims of the JBI, which include:

- Representing the variety of contemporary perspectives on ethical issues in health and medicine
- Fostering an interdisciplinary approach to bioethics
- Identifying common ground by creating a forum for dialogue across conventional academic boundaries.

In order to work towards the achievement of these aims editors should seek a balance of reviewers, and should consider the number of manuscripts sent to a particular reviewer so as not to overburden any one reviewer

One reviewer should be an expert in the primary discipline of the manuscript

At least one reviewer should have recognised expertise in the primary discipline or disciplinary or other perspective from which a manuscript arises. This will ensure that the manuscript's quality is assessed according to criteria and standards that are appropriate to that discipline or perspective. Where possible, reviews should provide criticism and suggestions to which authors may respond and which will improve the rigour of manuscripts according to the standards shared by those working within the same disciplinary perspective.

One reviewer should come from outside the discipline

In order to facilitate dialogue across the boundaries that define established or emerging disciplines the JBI seeks to publish papers that are intelligible across these boundaries. To support and foster interdisciplinary dialogues and understanding at least one reviewer should be chosen who is outside of the primary disciplinary perspective of the manuscript but who has other relevant expertise. This reviewer may have general expertise in bioethics or be an expert in some other field relevant to bioethics: the point is that they are ideally not an "insider" to that particular discipline or perspective. His or her main function is to identify aspects of the paper that may need to be revised so that it speaks to as wide an audience as possible. The kinds of criticisms and suggestion that arise from such a reading will be different from the kind of reading provided by the "insider" review.

Summary

In summary, editors should seek reviews that both scrutinise the substantive content of a paper and address its potential for contributing to cross-disciplinary dialogues. There is a natural tension which needs to be negotiated between the goals of rigour within a discipline or perspective and intelligibility between disciplines and perspectives. In practical terms, this often means providing guidance to authors that will lead to improvements in both rigour and intelligibility without sacrificing one in favour of the other.

Anonymity of reviewers

The issue of anonymity

For many scientific journals the names of the reviewers are concealed from authors but the names of authors are known to reviewers and editors. Other journals also conceal the identities of authors from reviewers.

There is an ongoing discussion on the relative merits of anonymity of either authors or reviewers and some journals and editors propose a fully open system in which all participants know each other's identities. There are arguments for and against each model. It is argued, for example, that anonymity avoids a bias towards better known authors and allows reviewers to comment more freely. On the other hand, in many settings knowledge of authorship is necessary to allow evaluation of a work in its intellectual context and in the setting of the author's own oeuvre. This is particularly relevant for an interdisciplinary journal where the contexts and theoretical perspectives can vary widely. Further, there is no evidence that open peer review reduces the quality of reviews and some evidence that it may improve it, and such review avoids secrecy and encourages reviewers to be objective and fair.

Authorship is to be open and reviewers are to be offered the choice of anonymity

The identities of authors are to be open to reviewers. Reviewers are given the choice of remaining anonymous or signing their reviews openly. The latter will still be provided with the opportunity to provide confidential comments to editors.

Data to be collected

Data will be collected regarding the impact of disclosure of the identities of reviewers on the nature and outcomes of reviews. This will be used to inform later decisions about whether to continue the practice of open reviews and whether it should be optional or mandatory.

The review processes

Concept of reviewing as an interactive dialogue

Ideally, the review process should occur as an interactive dialogue involving authors, editors and reviewers (who also represent potential readers of JBI). For the most part, there are practical limitations to the extent to which such a dialogue can be conducted, although some journals have sought to develop the concept of interactive reviews by utilising on-line discussion forums.

The JBI will continue to examine ways of developing and refining the processes by which it promotes dialogues involving the community of authors, reviewers and readers which it serves.

Assessment of review quality

Editors should assess reviews for quality. They may edit reviews before sending them to authors or simply decline to send them if they feel they are inadequate, unconstructive or inappropriate. As far as practical, performance characteristics of reviewers may be assessed from time to time, although individual performance data must be kept confidential.

Reviewer roles and responsibilities

General comments

It is expected that reviews will be honest, courteous, prompt and constructive. They should display the following elements:

The major strengths and weaknesses of study design and methodology should be identified and assessed;
The quality of the author's interpretation of the data, including acknowledgment of their limitations, should be reviewed;
The originality and strength of the argument presented should be assessed;
The major strengths and weaknesses of the manuscript as a written communication should be assessed;
Any ethical concerns raised by the study should be highlighted;
Useful suggestions for improvement of the manuscript should be provided;
Comments to authors should be constructive and professional;
Editors should be provided with sufficient information about the content and context of the work to allow them to make decisions about how to proceed.

Reviewers should be informed about the JBI's policies regarding reviewer responsibilities. Editors may choose to send reviewers' comments to the other reviewers to help inform them about current standards and to help develop the quality of the reviewing process.

Responsibilities to authors

Reviewers' responsibilities to authors include:

Providing feedback on the scholarly merits and the scientific value of the manuscript in a timely manner;
Avoiding gratuitous claims unsubstantiated by evidence or deriving from personal biases;
Respecting different disciplinary perspectives and refraining from making judgments if they lack expertise in a specific area;
Indicating whether the writing is clear, concise and relevant and assessing the manuscript's composition, rigour, accuracy and originality;
Avoiding personally derogatory comments or criticism;
Refraining from direct contact with the author about the manuscript without the agreement of the editor.

Responsibilities to editors

Reviewers' responsibilities to editors include:

Notifying the editor if they cannot complete the review in a timely manner and where possible providing names of other potential reviewers;

Assessing scholarly merit, originality and scope of the manuscript and indicating ways to improve it;

Identifying ethical concerns, including concerns about scientific integrity or about violation of accepted norms of ethical behaviour in animal or human research;

Disclosing pecuniary or non-pecuniary dualities and conflicts of interest and declining to review when a conflict of interests is evident.

If reviewers suspect misconduct they should notify the editor in confidence and should not share their concerns with other parties unless officially advised by the JBI that they may do so.

Responsibilities to readers

Reviewers' responsibilities to readers include:

Protecting readers from incorrect or flawed research or studies that cannot be validated by others;

Ensuring that relevant works by other authors are adequately acknowledged.

Ethical responsibilities of reviewers

Confidentiality

Material submitted for review should be treated in confidence and reviewers should take care to protect authors' identities and work. Such material should in general not be shared or discussed with anyone outside the designated review process without approval from the editors. Reviewers should not retain copies of submitted manuscripts and should not use the knowledge of their content for any purpose unrelated to the review process.

Constructive critique

Reviewers should be courteous and respect the independence of authors. Their comments should be capable of withstanding public scrutiny. They should acknowledge positive aspects of the manuscript under review, highlight faults or negative aspects in a constructive manner and offer suggestions about how the manuscript might be improved. They should explain and support their judgments sufficiently to allow editors and authors to understand how they might be justified.

Competence

Reviewers may be chosen because they have expertise within the disciplinary or other perspective of the submitted manuscript or because their general expertise in bioethics or a related field. In the former case, they should accept the assignment only if they have adequate expertise to provide an authoritative assessment.

Impartiality and integrity

Reviewers' comments should be based on objective and impartial considerations and should be free from personal and professional biases. Comments by reviewers with disciplinary expertise should address the intellectual merit, originality and quality of the manuscript, and those by reviewers from outside of the manuscript's disciplinary focus should address issues relating to the manuscript's accessibility to readers outside the discipline in a dispassionate and disinterested manner.

Reviewers should not obtain professional, financial, personal or other advantages from their access to material provided to them in the reviewing process.

Disclosure of dualities and conflicts of interest

Reviewers must disclose dualities or potential conflicts of interest prior to agreeing to review a manuscript. Where a conflict of interests exists the invitation to review should be declined.

Relevant dualities may relate to financial, professional or personal interests. These may include the fact that the reviewer is working competitively in a closely related field or is actively involved in or preparing to undertake work of a similar nature to that under review.

Timeliness and responsiveness

Reviewers should complete reviews in the time requested. If they are unable to meet a deadline for a review they should decline to undertake the task or at least inquire whether extra time can be given to allow them to do so.

Feedback to reviewers

Reviewers should be informed of the outcome of the reviewing process in relation to a paper they have reviewed. In addition, they should be provided with access to the other reviews of this paper once an editorial decision has been made.

Special categories of manuscript

Solicited manuscripts

The JBI may invite specific authors to contribute material for the journal (a practice referred to as 'soliciting manuscripts'). Submissions generated in this way should be subject to review in a manner that is consistent with the general policy for peer review as articulated above. It is in general not appropriate for the person soliciting a manuscript also to act as a reviewer of that manuscript.

An invitation may sometimes be misinterpreted by the invitee as implying a promise or guarantee of publication. Associate editors or others soliciting manuscripts should therefore be careful to explain to authors that no promise or guarantee of acceptance or publication can be made before the review process has been completed and the manuscript has been formally accepted for publication.

An invitation to submit a manuscript does not obviate the need for adequate peer review. As with other papers submitted to the JBI, reviews provide a service to authors and help to ensure the quality of material that is published.

Invitation may be used as a means to ensure representation of groups or perspectives which may otherwise be unrepresented (or under-represented) and which the JBI seeks to represent in accordance with its mission. In these cases the soliciting editor may take on a more active role in giving authors guidance and assistance, such as:

- providing specific guidance to authors about how to revise manuscripts in light of reviews;
- directing authors to commercial services that assist with English language expression, editing or academic writing;
- providing this kind of assistance to the authors directly or teaming the authors up with other persons who may provide this kind of assistance. (In such cases co-authorship or acknowledgement may need to be negotiated depending on the specific arrangement that is agreed upon, and the extent and type of contribution of the persons providing assistance).

Editorials

Editorials will usually be treated in a similar manner to other solicited manuscripts and will be sent for peer review.

Letters

Letters are not normally sent to external peer reviewers but may be edited by the JBI.

Book reviews

Book reviews are not normally sent for external peer review. However, such review may be sought at the editors' discretion.

Rapid reviews

Authors may request that a manuscript be considered for rapid review. This request must be made directly to the editors in writing and the request must be clearly justified. Good grounds for rapid review may arise where there is a high likelihood that timely publication may prevent significant harm or where there is an important external deadline (e.g. the passing of legislation) or event (e.g. epidemic) which affects the relevance and impact of the potential article. All such requests will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Authors should be aware that rapid review places extra demands on themselves as well as editors and reviewers. This is because the following conditions will need to be satisfied:

The submitted manuscript must conform to the stylistic and other requirements set out on the JBI's website;

The manuscript must be accompanied by an article submission form, a clear statement of any competing interests, a license for publication and if relevant details of informed consent processes or ethics committee approval;

The author should nominate three or four people who might be suitable reviewers for the manuscript and provide their contact details, including phone numbers and e-mail addresses;

The editors will undertake to inform the authors by the end of the next working day whether the JBI can offer rapid review. If the request is declined the editors may offer to consider the manuscript for publication in the usual way;

If the authors are offered a rapid review they will be required to return the revised manuscript within 48 hours of receiving the reviews from the editors and must agree to return the corrected proofs within 24 hours of receiving them.

If these conditions are satisfied and the manuscript is accepted for publication, the JBI will aim to publish it in the next issue (providing it is not a special themed issue).

Reviewer impropriety

It is essential that reviewers act with the utmost propriety. The following are examples of reviewer impropriety:

Displaying lack of respect for authors;

Making personal or disparaging comments about an author;

Lack of acknowledgement of conflicts or dualities of interest;

Misrepresenting facts in a review;

Unreasonably delaying the review process;

Unfairly criticizing a competitor's work;

Breaching authors' confidentiality;

Proposing changes that appear to support the reviewer's own work or hypotheses;

Making use of confidential information to achieve personal or professional gain;

Using ideas or text from a manuscript under review.

Appendix 1

Guidance for reviewers to appear on website

[Please note that the following text is reproduced from the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*. It is presumably protected by copyright and permission to republish it has not been sought or obtained.]

Thank you for agreeing to be a reviewer. We have attached a few tips for writing helpful reviews from our perspectives as both editors and authors. The overriding theme is to be clear so that there is no chance for misunderstanding, guessing, and interpretation on the author and editor's parts. Of course either author or editor may disagree with you, but your points need to be clear.

Be specific and give examples. General statements such as not a significant contribution, clinically unimportant, and poorly analyzed are not very useful without more details. Authors get frustrated trying to guess what parts of their manuscript need to be improved, and editors essentially need to do a review from scratch to fill in the void.

Suggest corrective actions if possible.

Cover the major areas. Is the paper a useful original contribution? Is the paper appropriate for the audience? Are the methods and analysis valid and clear? Are the tables and figures clear and a good use of space? Are the writing and presentation clear and concise? Is the literature review current and does it place the study in appropriate context? Are the conclusions valid? Is the discussion insightful?

Prioritize your concerns. It helps both author and editor to know what are the major issues that must be addressed, and which ones are minor and not as critical to the survival of a paper.

Be respectful of the authors. Scholarship is difficult and criticism is not pleasant to receive. Be fair and critical but make your comments in the tone that you would want to receive.

Be frank when making confidential comments to the editor. This section allows you to make comments that the author does not see. These comments may include your opinions about whether the manuscript is ultimately worth publishing.

Do not convey different messages to the author and editor. It is really confusing and sometimes even hurtful to an author to have a reviewer "be kind" or even positive in his or her comments to the author and harsh (rejecting the manuscript) to the editor. Good, accurate criticism should always be provided back to the author. Moreover, if you give generally positive feedback to the authors without raising significant concerns and then recommend to the editor that the paper be rejected, you will have created a communication problem that the editor will need to fix.

Especially for new reviewers, do not be shy. Act as the expert. You were chosen because you have some expertise, either as a reader of the literature or a contributor to this or related literature. Do not hold back.

Appendix 2

[Please note that the following text is reproduced from the *NSW Public Health Bulletin*. It is presumably protected by copyright and permission to republish it has not been sought or obtained.]

<p>The purpose of a review Confidentiality How to present your review Checklist of questions to ask about the paper Reviewer Topic The paper, section by section Presentation Common faults to look out for How to be a helpful reviewer</p> <p>The purpose of a review Confidentiality How to present your review Checklist of questions to ask about the paper Reviewer Topic The paper, section by section Presentation Common faults to look out for How to be a helpful reviewer</p>

Guidelines for reviewers

The purpose of a review

To help the Editor decide whether to publish the paper or not and whether to ask the author to revise it
To help the author improve the paper for publication in this or another journal

Confidentiality

The unpublished manuscript is a privileged **confidential** communication.
Do not copy or distribute any part of it, or use it for teaching or discussion with your colleagues
Do not keep copies on your computer or in hard copy
Do not ask someone else to review it for you without clearing this with the Editor first.

How to present your review

Please prepare your review as a Word document and send it as an attachment by email to the journal office.

Advice to the Editor on your view of whether the paper is publishable should be in the accompanying email, not in your comments for the author.

There are two reasons for keeping comments for the author separate from advice to the Editor. One is that the Editor, taking into account the other reviewers' comments, might come to a different conclusion from you. It is then difficult for the Editor to send a 'reject' decision if the attached review recommends publication—indeed authors sometimes use this apparent support as grounds on which to engage in argument with the Editor's decision. On the other hand the author may be confused at receiving an acceptance from the Editor accompanied by a review recommending rejection.

Checklist of questions to ask about the paper

Reviewer

Am I the right person to review this paper?

You should let the Editor know you cannot review the paper if:

you have a conflict of interest (you realise that you were involved in the work being reported, or are closely involved with any of the authors)

the approach is in a discipline in which you lack expertise

For example, you agreed to review a paper on 'effects of tobacco smoking' and find that it is in fact on the effectiveness of health promotion interventions, and you are a respiratory physician.

you find that you will not have time to do the review by the due date. We prefer to know this now rather than after you have missed the deadline.

Topic

Is the topic a significant public health issue?

Will it interest people working in public health?

The paper, section by section

Is the **title** informative?

Does the title describe what the article is about? Would an international reader coming across the abstract on Medline understand it?

Does the **abstract** give a clear summary of the paper's primary concerns?

Read the abstract after you have read the paper. For an article reporting on a study, the abstract should include a clear summary of the reason for the study, the place and time it was carried out, the study type, the population or study subjects and the method of data collection and analysis. A sentence or two should cover the main findings and conclusion.

Does the **Introduction** summarise what is already known on this topic and tell the reader why this study needed to be done? Is the question that the work seeks to answer clearly stated?

Are all the **methods** outlined in the Methods section?

The basic principle is that another researcher should be able to repeat the study on the basis of the information given. Check that the following are included:

Place and time of study (e.g. Lismore, NSW, April–November 2005)

Study type (e.g. randomised double-blind crossover study, or content analysis of health promotion leaflets)

Sample, population or study subjects (who or what they were and how many of them)

How the data were collected and recorded

How the data were analysed, i.e. what measures, tests and models were used.

Does the **Results** section set out the findings clearly?

The tables should give information that is consistent with the text but does not merely duplicate it.

Do the results look plausible?

Given your experience of the field, does anything just look wrong? (For example, a 99% response rate for a 'voluntary' survey.) It may nonetheless be correct, but the authors should be very clear about how and why they got such an unusual result.

Does the **Discussion** summarise the implications of the findings and examine obvious problems with the methods or findings?

Are the references appropriate and carefully cited?

References to support claims of scientific fact should be readily accessible and authoritative (in the peer-reviewed literature or from recognised bodies such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics or the World Health Organization). Unpublished work and personal communications are not acceptable as support for claims of fact. Check that the authors have not ignored a major source of relevant information, or misrepresented the findings of any studies you are familiar with.

Presentation

Is the paper too long?

Unless the Editor advises otherwise, *Bulletin* papers should usually be about 1500 words long, focused on a single question. If you suggest that more information is needed about methods, or a longer discussion, remember also to suggest where cuts can be made. Is the writing repetitive? Are some of the tables unnecessary or too big? Has the author attempted to cover too much ground? Or would the paper be better as a short report (e.g. an item for Communicable Diseases Reports)?

Is the structure appropriate to the contents?

For a paper that is not reporting an empirical study, the traditional IMRAD (Introduction, Methods, Results And Discussion) format may not be appropriate.

Could you follow the argument of the paper as a whole easily after one reading?

If not, there is something wrong with the way the paper is written.

Is the text full of jargon and technical terms?

Remember that the *Bulletin* is read and used by a range of public health workers including epidemiologists, clinicians, Aboriginal health workers, policy analysts, HIV/sexual health educators, mental health specialists, nurses, and journalists/media staff. Point out any jargon that would not be widely understood.

Is the text badly written, with grammatical errors and awkward confused sentences?

It is helpful if your review points out difficulties in this area, perhaps with some examples, but you are not expected to suggest detailed corrections or rewrite sentences. If the writing is particularly bad, the authors will be asked to rewrite the paper, but if the errors are minor and occasional, they will be picked up in the *Bulletin's* copy editing process.

Could graphs or tables be improved by being rearranged?

Are the references in medical journal (Vancouver) style, in numerical order?

Please point out any errors in journal title abbreviations, spelling of author names etc. See the [Information for Authors](#).

Common faults to look out for

Overall

Long wordy essays around the topic—these are not appropriate for the *Bulletin*.

Political polemics in favour of a single point of view.

Repetition of material in different sections of the paper.

Methods

Inappropriate methodology (a study interviewing doctors cannot tell you much about patient satisfaction; causal questions cannot be answered by descriptive studies)

Failure to describe methods of analysis

Results

Results presented are based on data or analysis not mentioned in the Methods section.

Tables don't add up. If there are 57 respondents, it is impossible for 53.8% to say 'yes' to a question unless some didn't answer—if possible, add up the tables and calculate percentages.

Statements in the text that don't match the numbers in the tables.

Spurious accuracy. If the 95% confidence interval for an estimate is 3.4 to 8.7, and the detailed findings are in a table, there is no need to report findings in the text to two decimal places—whole numbers will do.

Words in the text don't match figures. If the text says that an exposure *lowered* the likelihood of some outcome, the OR or RR for the outcome should be <1.0. If the text says 'almost all' respondents did something, this should mean more than 95%.

Tables full of data that is no use as information for the reader. Do *Bulletin* readers really need to know all the percentages in answer to every question in a survey, or would the summarised measures after factor analysis or model-building be more use? (Detailed findings can be shown on the authors' website.)

Tables or figures reporting data from other sources, without attribution.

Discussion and conclusion

Does it look as though the authors had decided the answer before they did the study?

Are they trying to explain away inconvenient or unwelcome results?

Do they try to claim that non-significant findings still prove something?

Do they generalise too widely, i.e. assume that what holds true for Liverpool holds true for the rest of the world? (This might be the case in biology or pharmacology, but not for a social or health promotion finding.)

How to be a helpful reviewer

Try to deliver your report on time, but if things get on top of you and you're not going to meet the deadline, please let us know before the due date.

Tell us clearly if the paper reports:

a good piece of work that is badly written up (this can be fixed by rewriting)

valuable data that has been inappropriately analysed (the authors can reanalyse the data)

a badly designed study (it may be fatally flawed, and unfixable), or

a badly conceived or executed intervention (the *Bulletin* seeks to publish Best Practice examples).

Try to distinguish between a badly done study and a well-executed one whose results you don't like.

Don't write a review about the paper you would have written instead.

This does not help the authors fix *their* paper. Nor does it tell the editor whether it is a useful piece of work in its own right. Does the work succeed on its own terms? If you have serious concerns that the whole paper is barking up the wrong tree, email the issue's guest editor or the Editor and check what the intended purpose of the paper is. It may be that you are not the best reviewer for it (see **Am I the right person to review this paper?** above). On the other hand, you may be the one who spots that an entirely wrong approach has been used to address a public health question.

Try to help the authors do better next time.

Part of the *Bulletin*'s purpose is to contribute to the development of a well-trained and informed public health workforce. Rather than simply rejecting substandard writing, we aim to help public health workers to reach publishable quality. Any advice you can give that would help the authors improve their work is greatly appreciated.

There is no rule about how long your review should be, but helpful reviews are usually about half a page to two pages.

See the attached sample reviews.

Sample review 1 (unhelpful)

The paper provides some interesting material, but not a lot that is new.¹ The main subject is how 'local council polices have a profound effect on safety at work'. The paper needs to be more tightly organised around this topic. As it stands the paper is poorly organised.² Also, it begins with more sophisticated concepts, but fails to sustain itself at this academic level.³ It also needs to clarify better what is referring to 'physical' aspects of the workplace and 'cultural' ones. I voted for a reject; even though I considered an R&R, I conclude that the author(s) didn't seem to have what it would take to effectively make it into a high-level piece of work.⁴

Comments

1. It would be helpful to say whose work has already covered these ideas.
2. What is wrong with the organisation? How could it be improved?
3. This may not be relevant for practical work in workplace health and safety.
4. This remark does not belong in the comments for the authors and should be addressed privately to the editor. It amounts only to personal abuse; even if it is true, the author might get help to improve the paper.

Sample review 2 (minimally helpful)

The paper is a descriptive account (case series) of the public health management of a cluster of cases of chickenpox at a Cooma school.

I feel the subject matter is relevant and of interest, although I'm not sure that it complies with the *Bulletin*'s word limit for short reports.¹

I would make only minor suggestions for amendments:

Provide a brief discussion of the rationale for widespread vaccination of the school students and the relation of this decision to the national guidelines.

Time is presented in the 24-hour clock. I understand that time presented in this way should be followed by the term 'hours'. For example, (pg 2, case 9) '0600' should read 0600 hours.²

Comments

1. The word limit is a matter that is checked by the *Bulletin* staff. If the paper is too long, it is helpful to suggest where cuts could be made.
2. This is a matter of editorial house style and will be attended to during copyediting.

Sample review 3 (more helpful)

It is unclear whether this paper is about leukaemia or all childhood cancers. The message that moving the power lines caused the reduction in admissions for childhood cancers is too strongly made, particularly in the Conclusions. There may be a number of explanations for this change, and none of them have been properly controlled for in the analysis.

The comment that there is literature to support a link between the presence of power lines and cancers in childhood is absolutely true, but if the authors looked, they would find literature to support a link with radiation emissions, water pollution, parental occupation and many other environmental factors. Therefore the fact that literature exists does not improve the ability of this study in finding a link in the areas studied.

In summary, because the link between power lines and childhood cancers is so important, it has been studied using far more rigorous methods than used in this study. Unfortunately I cannot conclude that this paper makes a scientifically valuable contribution to research on the subject. I would recommend that the authors do more research on appropriate methodologies for environmental epidemiology before taking the study further.

Comment

This report makes it clear that the study is fatally flawed and not worthy of publication, but leaves it to the Editor to decide about rejection.

Sample review 4 (very helpful)

The study described in the paper used information on hospital admissions to Prince John Hospital and magnetic readings from around power lines to test the hypothesis that the reduction in magnetism arising from moving the power lines away from Sherwood township was associated with a reduction in childhood cancers in the local population. Two postal areas were studied based on their proximity to the power lines, a distant area acting as a control region. Two years were studied, one before and one after the power lines were moved. Only data for the summer months were studied.

Subject matter

The association between power lines and childhood cancer is an important public health question and the possibility that high-voltage facilities could be the cause of higher rates of cancer is of major concern to the community. Because the facility in question is a major contributor to the NSW economy, the question has important implications for industry in NSW and is therefore highly relevant to readers of the *NSW Public Health Bulletin*.

Scientific quality

To their credit, the authors have:

provided background that supports their argument that power lines contribute to the burden of cancer in children

used a control region in their study design

used two time periods, one in which the exposure was present and the other in which there was clearly an absence of exposure

stated that the results could have been explained by other confounding environmental factors such as parental smoking rates or oncogenic viruses or by chance, e.g. a cluster of cases of genetic propensity to cancer.

However, I have concerns over the methodology:

The reason for studying only the summer months was not justified in the Methods section.

Was any attempt made to relate the magnitude of change in magnetic charge levels to expected changes in cancer admission based on published results from other studies? That is, how consistent was the magnitude of the observed change with changes observed in other studies?

Is it possible that admission patterns from each of these geographic regions might have independently changed over the two years? Admissions to only one hospital were studied, but there are other hospitals in the region that patients might have attended.

Was the potential for different patterns of carcinogen (e.g. farm chemical) exposure between the two regions considered?

Was there a demographic change associated with the moving of the power line? Is it possible that families with young children moved away from the area after the closure of the Tucker power station for employment reasons? A comparison of the 1996 and 2001 Census data for the two postal areas could answer this question.

The study would have been more convincing had a greater number of postal areas been studied. Two regions is a very small sample size.

The study may have been more convincing had a greater number of years of hospital admissions been studied in order to gain a better sense of the prevailing pattern of admissions in each geographic region prior to moving of the power lines. A historically wide variation would suggest that the change observed between 1999 and 2000 may not have been unusual.

Referring to the proportion of children with leukaemia in Table 3, if the moving of the power lines was the only environmental change that occurred, why did the proportion with leukaemia in Scarlett double between 1999 and 2000? These proportions are based on very small counts and cannot be used to draw firm conclusions. Confidence intervals would reveal this difficulty.

The use of the tobacco exposure information is not well justified or discussed. What is the interpretation of the dramatic differences observed between the two years? How valid is this as a measure of actual exposure of children to tobacco smoke?

Table 1 does not provide confidence intervals for the percentage change in the proportion of admissions that had a cancer diagnosis. It is unlikely that these are statistically significant, particularly in the 0–4 age group.

Tables 3 and 4 do not show confidence intervals for proportions. Confidence intervals for counts based on the Poisson distribution could also be included in Tables 1, 3 and 4.

Median length of stay might be a better measure of bed stay. Averages are more suited to normally distributed data, but length of stay tends to be left-skewed in its distribution.

Presentation

The manuscript is of an appropriate length, although the abstract appears to be longer than the prescribed limit of 150 words. The paper is well written and easy to understand.

Is there a legal concern about mentioning the name of the power company?

The acronym AEP is used but not defined.

(Covering note to editor

I would have strong concerns about publishing the manuscript in its present form, unless the limitations were presented more clearly and thoughtfully and the conclusions diluted accordingly. This study provides evidence to show that there was a difference in cancer admissions between the two years and geographic regions. However, a sample size of two regions, one exposed and one non-exposed, is insufficient to draw a firm conclusion that the power lines were the cause of the changes without better accounting for other, unmeasured confounding factors.)

Comment

This thorough review gives the editor the information on which to base a decision and also offers advice to the authors so that they both understand the rejection and can plan better research in future