
Letters to the Editor

Peer and Editorial Review of Submitted Manuscripts

Dear Dr. Toth:

Regarding our manuscript “Can gender differences be evaluated in a rhesus macaque (*Macaca mulatta*) model of focal cerebral ischemia?”¹ I appreciate you taking the time to speak with me by phone on 11/17/2008 to address my concerns over the current system of manuscript review and status for *Comparative Medicine*. This follow-up letter includes a summary of the issues we discussed and the actions taken.

I want to emphasize again that there were no issues regarding the peer review process itself. I have always felt that the peer review process improves the quality of my manuscripts. However, this is the first time in 15 years serving as a reviewer and submitting manuscripts as an author that I have encountered a dual review process involving peer review prior to acceptance of a manuscript and then an independent editorial review afterwards. You had indicated to me that this system has been in place for your journal for the past few years and that I was the first author to raise concerns about this dual review process.

One of my major concerns was that there was no complete disclosure of this dual review system in either the instructions to the authors for your journal or in the acceptance letter I had received. The instructions to the authors indicated that all manuscripts are evaluated by three reviewers and that once a manuscript is accepted, a copyedited proof would be sent to the authors to allow review of suggested changes. The acceptance letter my coauthors and I had received in July had indicated that our manuscript had been accepted “in its current form for publication” and that 2 sets of proofs would be sent for review. Therefore when I received the first set of copyedited proofs requiring us to revisit issues already addressed during the peer review process before the manuscript would actually be published, it was a surprise. My coauthors and I didn’t understand that acceptance of our manuscript after peer review was contingent upon how we would respond to an independent editorial review during the proof stages. I do appreciate that in response to our conversation, you and your staff will be revising author communications so that the nature of the dual review process will be fully disclosed to authors before and during the submission process.

My other major concern had to do with your perspective that independent editorial review following acceptance of a manuscript after peer review strengthens the peer review process. I, however, feel that such a policy indicates lack of confidence in the peer review process since the editorial review occurs after acceptance of a manuscript and has the final standing even if it potentially over-rides or re-interprets the peer reviewers’ evaluations and comments. You had indicated that this second level of review was done in case there were issues overlooked by all three of the reviewers, “in particular with regard to the conclusions and their basis in data,” and to represent the concerns of the readership. Don’t the three reviewers you and your editorial staff select for their expertise and assign to each manuscript represent the concerns of their peers who are the readers? You had also indicated that the editorial review was independent of the peer review process in that you had not read the reviewers’ comments or the authors’ response to the

reviewers before your review. By performing such a level of review after manuscript acceptance, you are not only re-evaluating the authors’ work but also evaluating the efforts of the reviewers. You and I had agreed to disagree on this issue after our discussion.

I had considered withdrawing this manuscript as well as another manuscript currently under peer review and submitting somewhere else because of how strongly I felt on this issue of peer review. You had indicated that you respected my dilemma and would not impede me from publishing elsewhere should I take this step. However, I decided to continue the review and publication process as much time and effort had already been invested in these manuscripts.

As a reviewer, I put a lot of time and effort into the review of manuscripts and in training our residents and postdocs on the manuscript review process. These are responsibilities I take very seriously. It is therefore frustrating for me to learn that my efforts and others’ as reviewers for *JAALAS* and *Comparative Medicine* are likely viewed as incomplete and may be overlooked as a result of a second level of review at the editorial level after acceptance of a manuscript. Because of these concerns, I am requesting that I be removed from consideration as a prospective reviewer for *JAALAS* and *Comparative Medicine*.

I want to thank you again for hearing me out and considering my concerns and perspectives on your journal’s current system of manuscript review and status.

Sincerely,
Stephanie J Murphy, VMD, PhD, DACLAM
Oregon Health & Science University

Reference

1. Murphy S, Kirsch J, Zhang W, Grafe M, West G, del Zoppo G, Traystman R, Hurn, P. 2008. Can gender differences be evaluated in a rhesus macaque (*Macaca mulatta*) model of focal cerebral ischemia? *Comp Med* 58:588–596.

Response to Dr. Murphy’s Letter to the Editor:

Dr. Murphy raises some important issues and perspectives relevant to the process of review, acceptance, and publication of manuscripts submitted to the AALAS journals. Review of submitted manuscripts occurs in three stages: before peer review (Associate Editors), peer review (invited anonymous reviewers and Associate Editors), and after peer review (Scientific Editor and Editor-in-Chief). All submitted manuscripts are initially reviewed by the journal staff for formatting, and the Editor-in-Chief, in some cases after discussion with the Associate Editors, determines that the manuscript has been submitted to the appropriate journal based on the content of the article and the mission statements of the two journals. In some cases, articles are transferred between the two journals with the consent of the authors, although authors also have the option of withdrawing the article from consideration. Next, the Associate Editors review manuscripts in the process of selecting peer reviewers. In some cases, Associate Editors, usually in consultation with the Editor-in-Chief, reject articles at that stage without external peer review because of inappropriate content for the AALAS readership, blatantly poor science, or inappropriate inclusion of animal or human subjects.

Manuscripts that pass this initial screening are sent for peer re-

view. Certainly the Associate Editors and I highly value the contributions of the reviewers, as these individuals are carefully selected and generally have expertise or perspectives that are highly relevant to the topic of the manuscript. However, reviewers are not infallible, not all reviews are of equal quality, and sometimes the editorial team has expertise or perspectives that the reviewers may lack. After reviews are received, the Associate Editors rank reviewers, and those with poor performance in terms of quality or timeliness are generally not asked to review again.

After acceptance, manuscripts are reviewed for form, omissions (e.g., *P* values and citations), and grammar by the Scientific Editor, who generates related queries for the authors. After this editing, but before the edited manuscript is returned to the authors, I (Linda) personally read, with varying degrees of thoroughness, all articles that are scheduled for publication. I realize that at this stage, concerns raised by the reviewers have been addressed to the reviewers' satisfaction, but time constraints prevent me from reading all submitted articles prior to acceptance and editing. I do not review the reviewer's comments. The article must be able to stand on its own merits. Even if a specific issue was raised during the peer review process and addressed to the satisfaction of the reviewers, if I perceive the same concern, then apparently the issue has not been effectively addressed within the body of the manuscript.

After my secondary review, I return the large majority of accepted manuscripts to the authors with relatively minor editorial suggestions, as well as the changes made by the Scientific Editor. However, any remaining questions and concerns must be fully addressed. My expectation is that the authors would want to address such concerns prior to publication, as other readers may have similar questions. As authors ourselves, the editors value all comments that we can address in our work before it becomes public, regardless of when that message is delivered or who delivers it. Together we are surprised to find that Dr. Murphy and her colleagues do not share that view, as other authors have generally been appreciative of constructive feedback at any stage of the process.

Authors should be aware that reviewers are anonymous and do not have ultimate responsibility for what is published. That responsibility resides publicly with the Editor-in-Chief, and as Editor-in-Chief I cannot in good conscience relegate this responsibility to others. Like other reviewers, the Editors are not infallible or all-knowing. Some manuscripts are published with flaws or issues that should have been addressed during the review process. I do not fault anyone for this; it happens in all journals, including the most prestigious. However, the Editors view quality as an important goal and fully expect that the quality of the AALAS journals will improve with our continued attention to rigorous and layered review. We ask that discerning readers help in this process by using Letters to the Editor as a forum for discussion of

published articles. To that end, the editorial staff has developed a policy for Letters to the Editor. This policy will be inserted whenever Letters to the Editor are published and is also now included in the Instructions for Authors.

Dr. Murphy requests that her name be removed from the AALAS reviewer lists because reviewers' views are not the sole determinant of whether an article is ready for publication. Removing names from our reviewer lists is impossible for us in the context of the editorial software we use, as all authors of published articles are automatically listed. Because the Associate Editors are now aware of this request, they will avoid asking Dr. Murphy to serve as a reviewer in the future. However, in the event of an inadvertent request, Dr. Murphy is naturally free to decline, as the case with all who are asked to review for the journals. Similarly, authors are free to make their own decisions regarding where to submit their work and can withdraw a manuscript from consideration for the AALAS journals at any time.

In response to Dr. Murphy's raising these issues and to provide full disclosure, the acceptance letters and instructions to authors for the AALAS journals have been revised to reflect the possible need for substantial modifications prior to publication of accepted manuscripts. However, the Editors remain committed to our efforts to maximize the quality of the articles that are published in the AALAS journals. This commitment to quality improvement benefits our readership, our authors, and the stature of AALAS and its publications.

*Linda Toth, AALAS Journals Editor-in-Chief
Southern Illinois University*

*Ravi Tolwani, Comparative Medicine Associate Editor
The Rockefeller University*

*Susan Compton, Journal of the American Association for
Laboratory Animal Science Associate Editor
Yale University*

Letters to the Editor

Letters discuss material published in *Comparative Medicine* in the previous 3 issues. They can be submitted through email (journals@aalas.org) or by regular mail (9190 Crestwyn Hills Dr, Memphis, TN 38125). Letters are not necessarily acknowledged upon receipt nor are the authors necessarily consulted before publication. Whether published in full or part, letters are subject to editing for clarity and space. The authors of the cited article will generally be given an opportunity to respond in the same issue in which the letter is published.