

Being a journal editor

Rebecca Linssen

Editing a journal can be a very difficult but very rewarding job. This article discusses the different areas that are involved in editing *Hospital Medicine*, to give readers an idea of the scope of the role.

Collins English Dictionary (1995) gives two core definitions of an editor:

'A person who edits written material for publication, a person in overall charge of the editing and often the policy of a newspaper.'

The role of editor of a journal varies widely between different journals. The editor's remit can include any or all of the following: selection of papers for inclusion, commissioning articles, promoting the journal, editing papers, overseeing production and printing, writing editorials and other articles. It also varies depending on the type of journal being edited, does it centre on reviews, does it publish original research, or does it mix both?

I edit *Hospital Medicine*, which is a clinical review journal, and so this article will focus mainly on the trials and tribulations involved in that role.

FIRST PRIORITY: YOUR READERS

Your readers may vary in number from a few hundred to many hundreds of thousands, but you must always remember why they read the journal and try to tailor the content to their needs. It sounds obvious but it's the single most important thing for an editor to consider.

Hospital Medicine is a clinical review journal. Our aim is to provide our readers with concise, accurate, peer-reviewed clinical articles which allow them to update their knowledge with current thinking in whichever field they

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are interested in, without having to spend valuable time doing literature searches and hunting down articles in libraries. We publish fully referenced articles so that if a reader wants to gain further information on a subject, it is relatively easy for them to do so.

AUTHORS

Commissioning, liaising with and advising authors is a major part of the editor's role. It is important to ensure that potential authors are fully briefed as to the exact requirements of commissioned articles, and that people who wish to submit articles to the journal are given appropriate encouragement.

An editor must recognize that articles are often a labour of love. While an author's enthusiasm about their article can be catching, it is often better to reject something on first discussion than to give false encouragement and then reject an inappropriate article at a later stage in the publishing process. The editor must be clear exactly what the article being discussed will entail and whether this will fit with the journal's style and content (Fox, 2000).

Authors can become very frustrated by the peer-review process, and the bulk of my monthly phone calls can be taken up by talking to them during this time. Most people who review papers are not paid for this work (Paice, 2001), primarily to reduce any possible bias to their reviews, and this can make it difficult to get papers looked at quickly. After authors have spent ages writing and editing their paper, they are often understandably keen to see it in print as soon as possible. This can be a problem if amendments to an article are required, as psychologically authors often feel

that they have 'finished' with a paper when they have submitted it to a journal. It can be very difficult to regain the enthusiasm needed to work on a paper again, particularly if substantial changes are required. Tact and encouragement become very important at this stage. Being slightly more detached from the paper allows an editor to see how good it could be with a bit of attention, while authors are often so involved with the work that any amendments seem an insurmountable task.

RUNNING THE EDITORIAL TEAM

The editor is often seen as the lynch pin of a journal, the point where everything comes together. The team of people involved in producing the editorial content of a journal is large and may include any or all of the following people:

- Consultant editors
- Editorial board members
- Administrative team members
- Authors, including professional authors and freelance writers
- Production team
- Printers
- Copy editors
- Designers
- Illustrators.

These people all have different but vital roles to play in the production of a journal, from overseeing or undertaking peer review of articles, to laying-out and designing the journal, to editing the copy to ensure that it is accurate and that it reads well. I am often involved to varying degrees in all these processes, and have to maintain an overview of how they are all progressing.

EDITING

With all the other areas to consider, it is easy to forget the actual title of the job: editor. Whether this involves sub-editing articles for sense and accuracy, or reading final corrected pages, the editor should have read the whole of an issue to ensure that the balance is correct, and that it is achieving all that it aims to do.

The subediting process can be complicated, particularly when working on journals that publish original research. It is very easy for authors to get so close to their own articles that they cannot see any mistakes or areas that are unclear. When I edit an article, I must look out for areas that readers might not understand, particularly important when working on a general journal like *Hospital Medicine*. It is easy for an author to assume a lot of prior knowledge that a specialist audience may have, but that doctors working in other fields may not. The editor's aim is to make the article as straightforward for people to read as possible without losing any accuracy. It's a fine line to tread.

KEEPING UP TO DATE

Editors have to keep up to date with developments in the field, including scientific and pharmaceutical developments, political changes and educational issues. This ensures that journal content is topical, as well as potentially leading to changes in areas that the journal covers. An example of this within *Hospital Medicine* was the recognition that all doctors are becoming more involved in the education of other doctors. To this end,

Hospital Medicine introduced the Education and Training Update section, which aims to help all hospital doctors in the day-to-day teaching that they have to do, covering issues such as management of trainees, educational issues and the theories behind educational methods.

FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES

An awareness of commercial opportunities is important, particularly ensuring that potential activities do not compromise the journal's reputation or authority. This has to be balanced against the need for a journal to remain profitable in order for the publisher to continue to publish it. There are a number of potential areas of conflict involved in medical publishing, including advertisements which make unsubstantiated claims, the place of author's conflicting/competing interests, supplements to the journal which may be sponsored by interested companies, and the place of advertorials. It is often the editor who establishes the journal's policy on each of the above areas, to ensure that readers can ascertain the validity of the information being presented to them.

It is important to remember that all journals must run within a set budget.

Out of this pot must come payments for authors, illustrators and freelance editors. It is part of the editor's role to balance all these payments, and get the best possible outcome with the budget available.

REPRESENTING THE JOURNAL

The editor is often the public face of the journal. I represent the journal at press conferences, international meetings and interviews, and have to ensure that the journal is accurately portrayed on such occasions.

WHY BE AN EDITOR?

Editing is not always easy, and often requires large amounts of tact and diplomacy, as well as long hours and working to tight deadlines. However, most editors take inordinate pride in their journals and are extremely dedicated to their readers. The satisfaction which I feel when I see *Hospital Medicine* in print, or receive feedback from readers or authors, makes the whole juggling act worthwhile. **HM**

Conflict of interest: RL is the editor of Hospital Medicine.

Collins English Dictionary (1995) Harper Collins, London

Fox R (2000) Writing a case report: editor's eye view. *Hosp Med* 61: 863-4

Paice E (2001) How to write a peer review. *Hosp Med* 62: 172-5

KEY POINTS

- The role of an editor can involve numerous different jobs, from commissioning to editing to writing to promoting the journal.
- The editor is vital in maintaining a balance between the interests and needs of different people involved in the journal.
- Editing is not always easy, but the satisfaction felt when seeing your journal in print makes it worthwhile.

Medical publishing series

This series, which started in October 2000, will include articles on:

- Finding health information on the internet (health professionals)
- Finding health information on the internet (consumers)
- Writing case reports: an editor's eye view
- How to write a book
- Getting a book published
- Being a journal editor
- Writing for the popular press
- How to write a review article
- How to write a good peer review
- Writing a CD-ROM
- The future of journals
- Publishing on the internet
- How to write a grant application
- How to publish a research paper
- Writing a letter
- Updating your CV