DEALING WITH EDITORS’ AND REVIEWERS’ COMMENTS

Wilfred C.G. Peh
MBBS, MHSM, MD, FRCPG, FRCPE, FRCR
Editor, Singapore Medical Journal
Clinical Professor, National University of Singapore
Senior Consultant and Head, Department of Diagnostic Radiology,
Alexandra Hospital, Singapore
Email: wilfred.peh@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION
It is very rare for submitted manuscripts to be accepted outright without the need for revision. The vast majority of manuscripts are either rejected or require revision. Authors will therefore need to be able to deal with the editor’s and reviewers’ comments in a dispassionate fashion.

The communication from the editor is usually in form of a letter delivering his judgement upon the manuscript. Possible judgements include: rejection without further submission, rejection with an opportunity to resubmit, major revision without a promise of acceptance, minor revision, acceptance subject to minor revision, and outright acceptance.

The reviewers’ comments are usually included either as an attachment to the editor’s letter or are directly incorporated into the letter. Ideally, the reviewers’ comments should be edited and itemised to facilitate a point-to-point reply by the author. The copy editor’s input may or may not be included at this stage.

REJECTION
Anyone who has written enough papers would have had their manuscript rejected some time or another. After getting over the initial (and natural!) phase of dejection, it is worthwhile for the author to analyse the reason(s) for rejection and to make the best of the situation.

The most complete form of rejection occurs when the editor has not even sent the submitted manuscript for review. This usually occurs when the subject material is outside of scope of the journal or is inappropriate for that particular audience. A complete rejection may also happen if it duplicates material that has very recently been accepted by that journal or has recently been published in similar journals.
It is pointless to challenge the editor’s decision for manuscripts that have been rejected outright. It is better to re-examine the manuscript with fresh eyes and if it is still thought to have value, to rewrite and submit to another journal.

Other reasons for rejection include: incomplete manuscript or one that does not conform to journal requirements, faulty experimental design, unacceptable interpretation of results and deductions, no new or worthwhile contribution, and extremely poor writing that cannot be salvaged even by the journal copy editors. These rejected manuscripts are usually returned with editor’s and reviewers’ comments.

These comments are extremely useful as the comments can be used to improve the article. The manuscript can almost always be improved by incorporating changes based on the reviewers’ comments, making subsequent acceptance by another journal easier.

**REVISION**
A request for revision should be viewed positively as it means that there is a possibility that the manuscript may still be published. The editor’s and reviewers’ comments usually aim at making the manuscript better, so that it may eventually conform to the journal’s standards. In short, there is still hope!

Reasons for revisions are numerous and include: minor faults in methodology, minor inaccuracies or inconsistencies in data, faulty deductions, excessive data or text, poor or excessive illustrations, and poor but salvageable writing.

Most authors resubmit their revised manuscript to the same journal. The manuscript should be revised accordingly to all the editor’s and reviewers’ comments. Each point should be answered and listed systematically on a separate sheet or cover letter. The changes should be clearly annotated in the revised text. Submitting sets of “clean” and “annotated” revised manuscripts are recommended, and should be done within the editor’s suggested time-frame.

While the general rule is that the “editor and reviewers are always right”, this may not always be true. On the occasion where the author strongly feels that some of the comments are inaccurate, contentious or unjustified, he or she can consider rebutting these comments but with reasons that are supported by evidence.
All communications accompanying the revised manuscript should be objective and emotion-free. For major revisions, the resubmitted manuscript will almost certainly be sent back to the same reviewer for another review. Top reviewers are highly valued by editors, so they are highly likely to side with the reviewers in any dispute—unless the authors have made extremely convincing and sound arguments.

If the author does not agree with most of the editor’s or reviewers’ comments, it is better to consider resubmission to another journal. However, without revision, chances of a successful outcome will probably be very low.

**SUMMARY**

All journals want to publish the best possible articles. Revisions are requested based on the premise that a submitted manuscript has sufficient potential merit to warrant the effort to raise it to a level that meets the journal’s standards. Bearing that in mind will help in dealing with editors’ and reviewers’ comments.