

Comparison of author and editor suggested reviewers in terms of review quality, timeliness and recommendation for publication

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Objective:

Many journals give authors the opportunity to suggest referees to review their paper. We report a study comparing author suggested (ASR) and editor suggested (ESR) reviewers of ten biomedical journals in a range of specialties to investigate differences in review quality, timeliness, and recommendation for publication.

Design:

Original research papers sent for external review at ten participating journals between 01/04/03 and 31/12/03 where the author had suggested at least one referee were included. Editors were instructed to make decisions about their choice of referees in their usual manner. Journal administrators then requested additional reviews from the author's list of suggestions according to a strict protocol using the journals' electronic manuscript tracking systems. *Review quality* was rated independently using the validated Review Quality Instrument (RQI) by two raters blind to referee identity and status. *Timeliness* was calculated as the interval between solicit and complete dates. *Recommendation* was calculated for six journals as proportion recommending acceptance (including minor revision), resubmission, or rejection. Reviewers who were suggested by both the editor and the author were treated as ASRs.

Results:

There were 788 reviews for 329 manuscripts. Review quality and timeliness did not differ significantly between ASRs and ESRs (Table). The ESRs were less likely to provide a recommendation of accept and accept or resubmit. There was no evidence that the effect of reviewer status on review quality, timeliness, and recommendation to accept and recommendation to accept or resubmit varied across journals.

Table: Impact of reviewer status on review quality, timeliness and recommendation to publish

	Author suggested	Editor suggested	Difference in effect between journals
Quality			
mean RQI score	2.58	2.64	<i>ANOVA</i> p=0.74
effect: mean of paired differences in scores (95% CI)	reference	0.05 (-0.04 to 0.15)	
Timeliness (days)			
median (inter-quartile range)	18 (10 to 27)	18 (12 to 26)	<i>Kruskal-Wallis</i> p=0.41
Wilcoxon signed rank test for paired difference: p-value		p=0.57	
Recommendation to publish			
accept: n (%)	93 (55.7%)	105 (49.5%)	<i>likelihood ratio test</i> p=0.26 p=0.47
resubmit: n (%)	50 (29.9%)	56 (26.4%)	
reject: n (%)	24 (14.4%)	51 (24.1%)	
<i>Odds ratio (95% CI) from conditional (on manuscript) logistic regression</i>			
accept (vs resubmit or reject)	reference	0.61 (0.38 to 0.98)	
accept or resubmit (vs reject)	reference	0.38 (0.20 to 0.70)	

Conclusion:

Author and editor suggested referees of biomedical research in a range of specialties did not differ in the quality of their reviews, but author suggested referees tended to make more favourable recommendations for publication.