

# Why do peer reviewers decline to review? A survey

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## Objective

Peer reviewers are usually unpaid and their efforts not formally acknowledged. Editors of some journals experience difficulty finding appropriate reviewers who are able to complete timely reviews, resulting in publication delay. Our objective was to determine why reviewers decline to review and their opinions of reviewer incentives.

## Design

We conducted an electronic survey of reviewers from five biomedical journals (*Archives of Disease in Childhood*, *BMJ*, *Emergency Medicine Journal*, *Gut*, and *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*). Questionnaire content was based on data from interviews with reviewers and feedback from the journals' online reviewing system. We randomly selected a sample of 200 reviewers (stratified by the number of times the reviewers had declined to review) from all reviewers who had been invited to review by each of the journals between 01/01/03 and 30/09/03.

## Results

We received a response from 606/890 (68%) active email addresses. The most frequently cited factors for declining to review were: *conflict with other workload*, (197/304, 65%), *having too many reviews for other journals*, (76/304, 25%); *tight deadline for completing review*, (77/304, 25%); *insufficient interest in the paper*, (53/304, 17%), and *absence from work* (48/304, 16%). Over half agreed that *financial incentives will not be effective when time constraints are prohibitive*, (341/606, 56%), and that *small financial incentives would not encourage reviewers to accept reviews*, (332/606, 55%). The most popular incentives included free access to journal content, (389/606, 64%); more feedback about the quality of the review, (337/606, 56%), and the outcome of the manuscript submission, (347/606, 57%); appointment of reviewers to the journal's editorial board, (338/606, 56%), and annual acknowledgement on the journal's website, (342/606, 56%).

## Conclusions

Reviewers are more likely to accept to review a manuscript when it is relevant to their area of expertise. Lack of time is the principal factor in the decision to decline.