Peer review—the “who” and the “how”

In an earlier editorial, we gave recognition to 227 persons who reviewed manuscripts for Tobacco Control from late 1993 to the end of 1995.1 Appended to this editorial is another list of 227 individuals—those who reviewed papers for the journal as outside referees or co-editors in 1996 and 1997. This list includes those who reviewed papers for two special supplements to the journal which were published in 1997.2,3 As usual, we express our appreciation to them all, as the quality of the journal depends on the vital service they perform.

In a 1993 editorial I explained how we performed peer review at that time.4 We have used a rigorous peer-review process since the inception of the journal, but that process has been refined and strengthened in recent years. So I’ll take this opportunity to explain how we now conduct peer review at Tobacco Control.

The most significant change is the use of an editorial committee which makes consensus decisions on papers submitted to the journal. The committee, modelled after a similar committee used by the BMJ, is often referred to internally as the “hanging committee”. That name did not originate from the macabre meaning of the word “hang”; rather, it is borrowed from the Royal Academy of Arts in London, which has used a “hanging committee” to decide which paintings to hang on its walls (personal communication from Dr Richard Smith, editor of BMJ).

Before 1997, I myself made interim and final decisions on papers—whether to accept or reject them, or to send them back to authors for revisions. Those decisions were aided by comments from peer reviewers and recommendations made by senior and associate editors. Beginning with papers submitted in January 1997, editorial decisions have been made by our three-member hanging committee, consisting of myself and our two senior editors—Dr Ross Brownson and K Michael Cummings. Dr Brownson is professor and chair of the Department of Community Medicine at Saint Louis University’s School of Public Health. Dr Cummings is chair of the Department of Cancer Control and Epidemiology at Roswell Park Cancer Institute in Buffalo, New York. The hanging committee meets weekly by conference call.

When papers arrive at our editorial office, they are assigned to Dr Brownson or Dr Cummings on an alternating basis, so that one of them takes the lead on each paper. At the next conference call, the lead senior editor makes a recommendation to the committee as to whether a new paper should be rejected outright or sent for external peer review. If the paper is designated for peer review, the committee identifies referees to whom the paper will be sent. Generally we send papers to three peer reviewers, to help the authors improve their papers and to guide them in their revisions. When we reject manuscripts, we also send the comments from peer reviewers, to help the authors improve their papers should they wish to resubmit them to another journal.

In addition, we usually share all the peer review comments (with identifiers removed) and our letters to authors with each of the reviewers. This gives them feedback on editorial decisions regarding the paper and allows them to compare their own judgments on the manuscript with those of their peers.

The hanging committee approach yields several benefits. First, three editors make joint decisions based on careful review and discussion; thus, decisions are more likely to be well-informed, fair to the authors, and free from any bias that one particular editor might bring to the table. Second, the approach distributes the workload among three individuals, which allows papers to be handled more efficiently. Third, a weekly meeting agenda ensures that the process moves forward continuously. In a future editorial, we will report trend data on how quickly decisions are made on manuscripts, how long it takes for accepted papers to be published, the number of papers submitted, and the percentage that are accepted for publication.

As we have noted previously,5 the peer review process is far from perfect, but it is the best form of quality control we have in “journalology”. We will continue to strive to improve the process, and we welcome comments on how to do so from our readers and contributors.

RONALD M DAVIS

Editor

3 Studies in community tobacco control: projects COMMIT and ASSIST. Tobacco Control 1997;6(suppl 2):S1–70.
4 Davis RM. Two years of Tobacco Control: how are we doing? Tobacco Control 1993;2:265–6.
Peer reviewers—1996 and 1997

Jasjit S Ahluwalia
David G Altman
Amanda Amos
Charles Atkin
Ann Baker
Dileep G Bal
John Baron
Karl E Bauman
John Beasley
Diane M Becker
Ramez N Bedwani
Michael E Begay
Neal L Benowitz
James Bergman
Lisa A Bero
Alan J Best
Lois Biener
Gregory N Connolly
Rick Boyd
Ross C Brownson
Germaine Buck
David M Burns
Deb Burton
Tom Carroll
Frank J Chaloupka
Simon Chapman
Anne Charlton
T L Chen
Pam Clark
Valerie A Clarke
Richard Clayton
Joel Cohen
Stuart Cohen
Graham Colditz
Gregory N Connolly
Terry L Conway
Thomas M Cooper
K Michael Cummings
Vera Luiza da Costa e Silva
James R Davis
Joseph R DiFranza
Miriana V Djordjevic
Douglas W Dockery
Rob Donovan
Russ Eggert
John Elder
Sherry Emery
Karen Emmons
Seth L Emont
Virginia L Ernster
Daniel H Ersho
Luis G Escobedo
Ruth A Etzel
Karl O Fagerström
Arthur Farkas
Roberta G Ferrence
Linda Perry
Michael C Fiore
Paul M Fischer
Edwin B Fisher, Jr
Brian R Flay
Roberto Forero
Jean L Forster
Stephen Fortmann
Godfrey Fowler
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John Garcia
Karen K Gerlach
Elizabeth Gilpin
Gary A Giovino
Stanton A Glantz
Russell E Glasgow
Thomas J Glynn
Marvin E Goldberg
Adam Goldstein
Michael Goldstein
Steven Gourlay
Nigel Gray
David Gregorio
Verner Grise
Ellen R Gritz
Janet Gross
Neil E Grunberg
Tyler D Hartwell
Gerard B Hastings
Anthony J Hedley
Jack E Henningfield
David Hill
Tom Hodgson
C D’Arcy Holman
Thomas P Houston
Philip P Huang
John R Hughes
Robert Hughes
Corinne G Husten
Andrew Hyland
Norm Hymowitz
Les Irwig
Peyton Jacob
Peter Jacobson
Carlos Roberto Jaén
Martin Jarvis
Leonard A Jason
Christopher Jenkins
Murray J Kaiserman
Nancy Kaufman
Theodore E Keeler
Juliette S Kendrick
Joel Killen
Alan King
Robert C Klesges
Howard K Koh
Thomas E Kottke
Lynn T Kozlowski
T H Lam
Tim Lancaster
Harry A Lando
Scott J Leischow
Edward Lichtenstein
Daniel Longo
Alan D Lopez
Jay H Lubin
Douglas A Luke
Karl E Lund
William R Lynn
Lynn MacFayden
Judith L Mackay
Marc W Manley
Marian Marbury
Alfred C Marcus
Tim McAffee
Ian McAllister
Bruce McCarthy
Ann McNeill
Robbin Mermelstein
Dawn Misra
Karen Monaco
Robert Morris
David Nelson
Paul Nordgren
Thomas E Novotny
Don Nutbeam
Judith K Ockene
Patrick O’Malley
C Tracy Orleans
Merete Oser
Deborah J Ossip-Klein
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Neville Owen
Michael D Parkinson
John L Pauly
Neal Pearce
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Diana B Petitti
John M Pinney
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David Pollock
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James O Prochaska
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Cynthia Rand
Donald J Reid
Patrick L Remington
Stephen Rennard
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Dorothy P Rice
Robyn Richmond
Michael Robbins
Robert G Robinson
Todd Rogers
Lynn Rosenberg
Jonathan M Samet
Rob Sanson-Fisher
Margot Schofield
Joel Schwartz
Randy Schwartz
Russell Scandra
Michelle Scollo
Herbert H Severson
Donald J Sharp
Saul Shiffman
Robert Shipley
Donald R Shopland
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Chris Silagy
Karyn Skaar
John Slade
Karen Slama
Leif Solberg
Laura J Solomon
Eduardo J Somoa
Glorian Sorensen
Kyle Steenland
Frances Stillman
Maxine L Stitzer
Stepping down

Having served as editor of Tobacco Control for the past seven years, I have decided to step down from this position. Since the journal’s launch in 1992, we have made great strides with the publication, and the positive feedback we’ve received from readers, authors, and many others has been gratifying. One of the most enjoyable aspects of my service as editor has been the opportunity to work with a superb team of co-editors, and with friends and colleagues at the BMJ Publishing Group who define the word “professional”. But it is time for me to move on to other challenges, and to let others take over the helm.

An advertisement recruiting candidates for the editorship appears below. I expect to pass the reins to the new editor early in 1999. Before then, in a future editorial, I will take the liberty of sharing with you more thoughts and reflections about the roles and accomplishments of the journal.

RONALD M DAVIS
Editor