

The uncredited architects of academic quality



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Having written editorials on peer review and journal editing in the past, it was encouraging to read a recently published paper by Alvin Munsamy from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's College of Health Sciences.¹ He writes about the attention given to authorship, citations, and journal impact metrics, while the critical work of peer reviewers and journal editors often remains unseen and undervalued. These contributors are foundational to research integrity, yet their contributions are persistently

unrecognised within institutional reward systems.

Munsamy begins by outlining the structure of the academic publication value chain: authors, reviewers, editors, and publishers all play important, interdependent roles in ensuring that scholarship is rigorous, accurate, and effectively disseminated. Authors of published papers benefit in terms of institutional reputation and standing within the scientific community, which improve their chances of successful research grant applications, promotion, etc. However, peer reviewers and editors carry responsibilities that are often disproportionate to the visibility and credit they receive. Despite being drawn from the academic community and managing complex tasks, their work typically remains invisible.

Peer review is considered part of academic citizenship, requiring time and expertise without direct compensation or formal recognition from either the institution in which they work or the international research community. The voluntary nature of this model is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain as academic teaching loads become heavier, research expectations remain high (in a time where USA funding has been withdrawn and more grants need to be written without guarantee of success), and research supervision duties increase with student numbers. In occupational health and other medical fields, academics are often required to meet their clinical responsibilities in addition to those already mentioned.

The scientific community – and the public – rely on the peer review process to maintain research integrity through the critique of methodology, originality, and relevance. However, these additional tasks are rarely considered in promotion applications or workload assessments. Journal editors are arguably even less recognised. Their responsibilities are far more than administrative. They assess manuscripts for relevance and quality, mediate disputes, guide authors in strengthening their arguments, and uphold ethical standards. They often liaise with authors through multiple revisions of manuscripts, even doing the work of co-authors without recognition. As for peer reviewing, journal editing remains largely “unseen”.

In 2020, Moher et al. published the Hong Kong Principles, which were developed as part of the 6th World Conference on Research Integrity, “with a specific focus on the need to drive research improvement through ensuring that researchers are explicitly recognized and rewarded for behaviors that strengthen research integrity”.² This was echoed in 2024 by the Academy of Science of South Africa in its call for recognising editorial and review work in academia.³ Continued lack of acknowledgement will make journal editors’ tasks of finding appropriate reviewers for manuscripts increasingly difficult – something that is already experienced by major occupational health journal editors⁴ (and others). Consequently, the quality assurance mechanisms upon which all scholarly publishing depend will be undermined.


Several initiatives have attempted to address this. Platforms such as Publons (integrated with *Web of Science*) allow researchers to record and verify their peer review activity, enabling them to include this work in CVs, grant applications, and institutional reviews.⁵ Similarly, ORCID supports the addition of peer review activities to researcher profiles, increasing visibility.⁶

Without formal acknowledgement mechanisms – whether through institutional policies, digital platforms, or integrated contribution taxonomies – peer review and editorial efforts risk becoming increasingly burdensome and less attractive to scholars. Giving credit for review work can improve the quality and accelerate the review process, while providing tangible rewards can encourage participation, particularly among early-career researchers who benefit professionally from documented review experience.

Declaration

ChatGPT was used in this editorial for improvement of flow and rephrasing of some sentences.

REFERENCES

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Another giant has fallen

The loss of another stalwart of occupational health has left our community bereft. A fitting tribute to Tony Cantrell can be found on page 4. Our hearts are heavy, and our lives are poorer without

him, but his contribution to this worthy profession will not be forgotten. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family – Jemima, his wife, who shared his passion for making workplaces healthier, his son John, and his daughters, Helen and Sarah.