

## **(4.1) Confidentiality of manuscript under review**

You have been invited by a prominent medical journal in your field to review a new manuscript submission. The article under consideration presents a highly novel approach to an existing problem that has not been previously published to your knowledge. You do not recognize the authors, nor do you perceive any conflict of interest related to the content of the manuscript. Accordingly, you accept the reviewer invitation. In evaluating the article, you identify statistical flaws in the analysis and also question the quality of the writing, such that you ultimately advise that the submission be rejected. The editor concurs with your recommendation to reject the article.

The following week, during a meeting with your research group, you share with your team this interesting paper that you just reviewed, remarking on the novel approach taken by the authors. The group debates the merits of the technique and agrees that it is interesting and worthy of additional investigation. Subsequently, your research group begins its own research seeking to evaluate the feasibility and utility of the new method. What ethical concerns are raised by this course of events?

### **Commentary**

When accepting an invitation to perform a review, the reviewer is agreeing to act as an agent of the journal in the review process. During the review process, the submitted article is the private and confidential property of the submitting authors, not of the reviewer, and the reviewer is ethically bound to maintain strict confidentiality regarding all aspects of the submitted manuscript. Such confidentiality helps protect the submitting authors who are at risk of harm by having their work shared with reviewers prior to its publication. Journals have clear policies regarding reviewer confidentiality, and potential reviewers are informed of such policies when invited to review. The electronic copy of the submitted manuscript should not be forwarded to other individuals, and at the conclusion of completing the review, printed versions should be shredded and electronic versions deleted. Even casual remarks to colleagues regarding the content of the article are inappropriate. In accepting the invitation, reviewers are providing a service to the journal and the field and may not personally benefit from insights gained through having access to the manuscript. Reviewers must refrain from referring to the work in any fashion as well as from sharing it with students or colleagues. Rather, reviewers are ethically bound to wait for the article to be published, or for the submitting authors to publicly disseminate the content of the manuscript in an alternate forum such as through a conference abstract or proceeding, prior to directly citing or applying the content of the manuscript themselves. In some instances, the reviewer may feel that the quality of the review would benefit by seeking input from a colleague who is an expert in the topic addressed by the submission. In such instances, the reviewer should first obtain permission from the journal prior to obtaining the colleague's input, and the identity of the additional individual who contributed to the review should be disclosed to the journal.

## References

- 1) AMA Manual of Style Committee. AMA Manual of Style: A Guide for Authors and Editors (10<sup>th</sup> edition). Oxford University Press, March 2007.  
<http://www.amamanualofstyle.com/view/10.1093/jama/9780195176339.001.0001/med-9780195176339-chapter-5> Accessed: December 23, 2015.
- 2) International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Responsibilities in the Submission and Peer-Review Process.  
<http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/responsibilities-in-the-submission-and-peer-peview-process.html> Accessed: December 23, 2015.
- 3) American Psychological Association. Guidelines for Reviewing Manuscripts.  
<http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/dhe/manuscript-reviewer-guidelines.aspx> Accessed: December 23, 2015.