

(4.4) Blinding of manuscript during review process

You have just accepted an invitation to review a submitted manuscript from a journal that uses a double-blind review policy. In reading through the manuscript, you strongly suspect the identity of the authors who submitted the work. Although the authors' names do not directly appear anywhere within the manuscript, the manuscript describes and references earlier work conducted by the research team, and the Methods section explicitly states by name the use of a specific medical device that, to your knowledge, is only used at a single center. You wonder whether it is appropriate to proceed in completing the review now that you suspect the identity of the manuscript's authors. How shall you proceed in this scenario?

Commentary

The integrity of the peer review process requires that reviewers provide a fair and balanced evaluation of the work under consideration. Many biomedical journals use a double-blind review process to promote this aim. Accordingly, authors submitting to such journals are instructed to blind their identity within the manuscript. Some aspects of the blinding process are straightforward, such as not directly including the authors' names, initials, or institution within the manuscript. However, other details within a manuscript may serve to effectively unblind the manuscript to the reviewers, even in the absence of directly disclosing the authors' identity. The present case provides a couple of scenarios through which such unblinding may occur, namely through descriptions of earlier work by the authors and through inclusion of methodological details associated with the authors. Authors can follow strategies to lessen the likelihood of unblinding of this nature. For instance, the group's past work should be described in the third person, similar to when describing past work by other groups, rather than described using terms such as "we" or "our." In addition, names of hardware, software, and other products that may be strongly linked with a given center should be blinded in the Methods section. It is also important to not inadvertently disclose the author or institution through details contained within Figures, or to disclose authors' initials when describing investigators' tasks within the Methods section. Through efforts such as these, it is often possible to sufficiently blind a manuscript to preclude the reviewer from being able to reliably identify the authors.

Despite the approaches identified above, in some instances it may be impossible to blind the manuscript regardless of efforts by the authors to remove identifying details. For instance, the methodology may be so unique, potentially performed exclusively at a single center, that even a general description of the methods without specific details will indicate the authors' identity. Also, despite the extent to which the described methods may seem to be associated with a single institution, it is possible that the reviewer is incorrect in the suspected identity of the authors. Therefore, if the authors have taken all precautions possible to blind the manuscript, it may be reasonable to perform the review despite suspecting the authors' identity. Nonetheless, in order to maintain the integrity of the review process, the reviewer is obligated to evaluate the manuscript in an unbiased fashion that is based on the quality of its content and not influenced by perceptions of the suspected authors. Invited reviewers are trusted to personally decide whether they are able to execute the review in such an impartial fashion prior to completing the review and to decline the review otherwise.

In the present case, you believe that you recognize the authors' identities due to insufficient blinding on the part of the authors. For instance, the case description notes first person references within the manuscript to earlier work as well as reference to explicit products

associated with the suspected authors in the Methods section. Since the journal's policy is to adhere to a double-blind review process, you should disclose to the journal the incomplete blinding by the authors and your suspected knowledge of the authors' identity. Although journal policies vary, the journal may recuse you from performing the review, thereby erring on the side of caution and removing a potential source of reviewer bias. While you occasionally may suspect the identity of the manuscript's authors, you should be cognizant of when the authors have made the fullest effort possible to blind a given manuscript and recognize that the author identity that you suspect may be incorrect. Nonetheless, when uncertain how best to proceed in a given case, it is advisable to take a conservative view and notify the journal of the concern.

References

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