

Financial Incentives to Reviewers: Double-edged Sword

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Dear Sir:

I read the article titled “Rewarding Peer Reviewers: Maintaining the Integrity of Science Communication” by Gasparyan et al. (1) with great interest. The authors have highlighted a pertinent issue which needs to be discussed vigorously to arrive to a consensus to enhance the participation of reviewers. Though peer-review method has its own limitations, it is central to the scholarly communication and keeps tabs on the scientific quality of the literature. Peer-review is a voluntary activity which is considered traditionally a service to science. Reviewing an article involves reading the manuscript, understanding the hypothesis, analyzing the methodology and results, and understanding the results in the light of current available literature; it is definitely a laborious and time consuming exercise for a reviewer. Though reviewing an article itself is a matter of pride, sparing time for reviewing a manuscript is always difficult for reviewers who are themselves researchers and busy with research, teaching and training. Absence of incentives whether financial or non-financial, is a major obstacle in attracting reviewers in today's time. Awarding the reviewers for their contribution has been a matter of discussion for some time.

Providing financial incentives to the reviewers is definitely a lucrative option to motivate reviewers; however, this policy is a double-edged sword. How a reviewer should be awarded financial incentives? Should it be cash incentive? Or should it be in form of waiver of publication charges for the manuscripts the reviewers submit? Or should the paid-articles be made freely available to reviewers. Whatever may be the mode of financial incentives, it would definitely improve the number of reviewers who are willing to review the manuscripts. There are two sides of every coin. Providing financial incentives do have demerits. At times, one receives comments made by the reviewers where one can be certain that reviewers had perhaps little idea of the subject that they have reviewed. Many researchers can identify themselves with being in this situation. There may be haste shown on the part of reviewers to finish their review-assignments to maximize financial incentives. Who would review the review-

ers' comments is the next natural question. It's definitely a more perplexed issue than it seems to be. Time has come when these questions need to be discussed in a more open, rational and realistic approach.

REFERENCE

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The Authors' Response

Combined Rewarding Mechanisms Can be Implemented to Incentivize the Best Reviewers

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Scholars involved in peer review contribute to the progress of science by sharing their own experience, improving the quality of published materials, and taking part in the communication between authors and editors. The best reviewers are highly valued by editors of indexed journals worldwide (1). Implementing a variety of rewards is important for maintaining a bank of cooperative evaluators and supporters of the target journals.

Scholarly journals have different rewarding strategies for their active reviewers, from simply generating automatic acknowledgments for submitted reviews to carefully evaluating scientific merits of the reviews, assigning credits, and sending further invitations to the most helpful contributors. At least in established and highly reputable scholarly journals, each reviewer invi-

tation is an acknowledgment of the scholar's academic achievements in a certain field of science and an incentive to cooperate further (2); and it is unlikely that there will be shortages of cooperative reviewers in such journals. The best reviewers value highly the opportunities to contribute to the progress of science by taking part in the constructive academic dialogue. Financial incentives for reviewers may deserve a place in a comprehensive strategy of rewards. Having said that, it may be difficult for many publishers to afford to continuously incentivize their contributors in such a way. Most reviewers of the mainstream science journals, and particularly those of the *BMJ*, accept that financial incentives are not important at all (3). It would probably be counterproductive and even ethically questionable to implement financial mechanisms of rewards in small and emerging scientific communities, where potential reviewers have gross conflicts of interest (4).

The overall picture is even more complicated when one considers the lack of transparency over the issue of (financial) rewards offered by publishers and standalone journals to their reviewers. There is no substantive evidence whatsoever to weigh advantages and disadvantages of each type of the rewards discussed in the index article (2), which is partly due to the inherent limitations of the current peer review systems. Most editors and reviewers alike prefer not to disclose the journal's in-house matters to the public. Publicizing the editor-reviewer-author relationships may not only bring transparency but, willingly or resentfully, may also create conflicts, damaging the reliability of the peer review. Not surprisingly, traditional top-ranking journals such as *The Lancet*, *Science* and *Nature* stick to the principles of the traditional peer review and do not openly publicize the reviewers' contributions. Improving the whole system by publicly displaying the reviewers' selection criteria and crediting/awarding mechanisms can be a workable solution in some cases (5, 6). Nurturing post-publication review and discussing

strengths and limitations of published items in logical and courteous letters-to-the editors is also an option. Journal editors can actively invite expert reviewers to share their thoughts not only before but also after publication. Those who prepare publishable, constructive letters deserve credits. The main problem, however, is that letters are not priority items for most established and new journals. In the former case, lack of space can be an issue, whereas in the latter the issue may be lack of readers' and reviewers' interest to read and evaluate what has been published. It remains to be seen whether the movement to open access to reviews and the encouragement to publish more letters can be widely applicable and useful for the scientific progress, especially in small and emerging scientific communities.

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