

opinion  
Editing, Writing &  
Publishing



# Employing Unprofessional Editors for Handling Submissions in Scholarly Journals

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Medical journals are among important forums for sharing scientific information. Presumably, all scientific contents submitted to a journal should be peer-reviewed. In this process, editors are gate-keepers and should be responsible for what they do.<sup>1,2</sup> Typically, after assessing the submission for the necessary components (*e.g.*, appropriate format and to check if the manuscript contains all the necessary sections such as statements on ethical clearance, conflicts of interest, and financial support), one of the editors is assigned to handle the manuscript through the peer review process; the handling editor assigns appropriate referees to evaluate the scientific merits and presentation quality of the submitted manuscript.<sup>2</sup> Peer review is not perfect; it usually takes a long time and has numerous flaws;<sup>3,4</sup> but, it is currently considered the only means acceptable by most scholars for evaluating the scientific merits of a submission.

Setting up a quality review system is of paramount importance for every scholarly journal. However, the process should not significantly delay the dissemination of important research findings. Although publishing preprints of a manuscript in repositories is an option for early release of information,<sup>5</sup> it is the moral duty of the editor to decrease the peer review time as short as possible, while maintaining the quality of published articles higher than a set minimum acceptable standard, I believe. To speed up the process, the journal may reward the referees in numerous ways.<sup>6</sup> For example, some journals give reviewers continuous medical education (CME) credits or free access to their online contents for a certain period for reviewing a manuscript. However, sometimes, the problem is before sending the submission out for peer review.

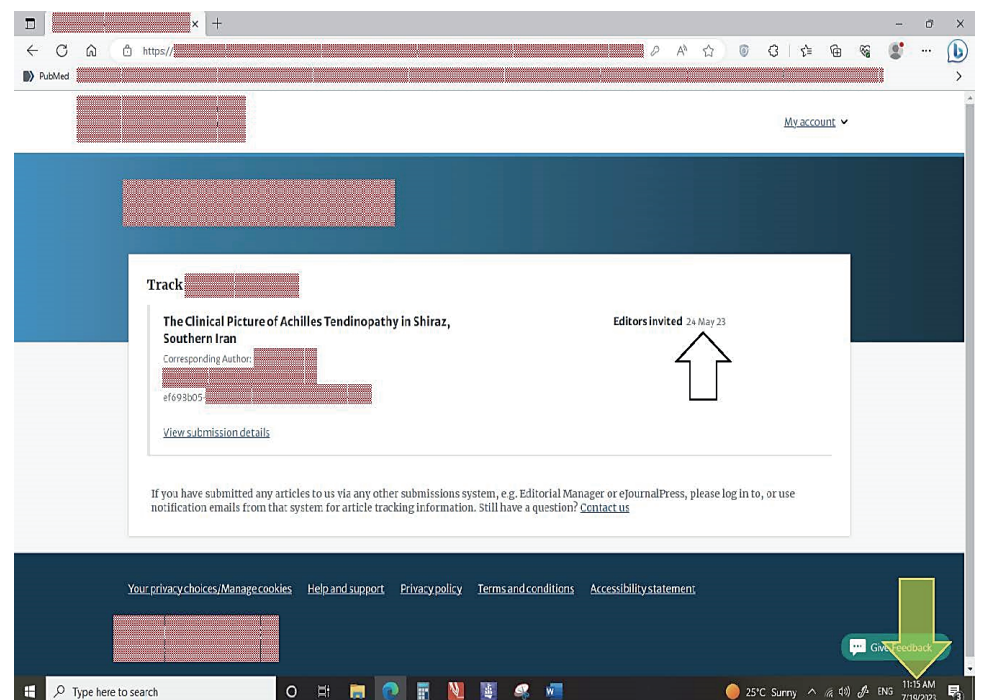
Since almost a decade ago, some journals employ researchers not officially trained in the editorship craft for handling manuscripts submitted to the journal. Upon receipt of a submission, the journal sends requests to a number of potential handling editors in hope that one of them accepts to manage the manuscript. Assigning these unprofessional editors to handle a submission, though might be inexpensive, may sometimes result in serious problems.

On May 20, 2023, a group of researchers from our center submitted an original article on the clinical picture of Achilles tendinopathy in our region to such a journal with the scope of musculoskeletal disorders. After the initial checks, since May 24, the journal has looked for an appropriate [unprofessional] handling editor; thereafter, the manuscript status on the online submission system has constantly read “Editors Invited” (**Fig. 1**). After a couple

of weeks of submission, the authors asked the journal office why there was such a long delay in assigning a handling editor for a manuscript on such a general topic, “tendinopathy.” The journal replied and assured the authors that they tried their best to identify an appropriate editor to handle the manuscript. After almost two months of submission, the desperate authors sent the journal office a request to withdraw the manuscript for the tardiness in the process. After two days, on July 20, the editorial office in an e-mail to the corresponding author mentioned that they “appreciate” the authors’ decision to withdraw the manuscript and archived the submission.

The question that arises is that if the journal editors knew that they were not able to find an appropriate handling editor to manage the submitted manuscript, why did they retain the manuscript for such an unacceptably long period? I, for one, believe that those who have not had any training in the editorship craft, although they might be considered an erudite scientist, should ethically not be involved in science publishing as an editor.<sup>7</sup> The editorship craft requires professional training.<sup>8</sup>

Part of training in the editorship craft includes awareness about ethical codes for editors and publishers.<sup>7</sup> One of the ethical and moral duties of editors is to pay full attention to carefully handle the submissions in a timely way. When a manuscript is being submitted to a scholarly journal, the authors are commonly asked to declare that the manuscript has not been published; nor is it under consideration by other scholarly journals. In this way, the authors are obliged to submit their manuscript at the same time only to a journal, to wait until a decision about their submission is made, and not to submit it elsewhere until the final verdict is received from the editorial office. In return, the editors are obliged to handle the submission carefully and in a timely manner to reach a final verdict as soon as possible. Careful and timely handling of each submission is in fact an ethical duty of each professional



**Fig. 1.** The screenshot of the journal online submission system. The black arrow shows the submission date; the yellow arrow, the time and date of the screenshot. Identifying data fields were blinded.

editor, I believe. It can attract more good authors and submissions. Careless handling of submissions by unprofessional editors, on the contrary, would ultimately result in a lower submission rate to the journal. It might also result in jeopardizing the scientific integrity of the research articles being published, in particular, and the body of evidence, at large. All those who are supposed to be involved in the science publishing enterprise should receive at least basic training in what they are expected to do. Being an erudite scholar does not necessarily make one a good editor.<sup>8</sup>

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