

### One (bad) article and four (great) editors

I have no reason to assume that the story I am about to tell is rare, but I am sure that stories like mine are rarely told. So here is a tale of a short article, which was eventually published in the *Scandinavian Journal of Gastroenterology* in the section “Letters to the Editor”.<sup>1</sup>

Briefly, I argued that the research on Barrett’s esophagus and esophageal adenocarcinoma has been misguided—embarrassingly misguided. I was neither equivocal nor ambiguous. I claimed that previous research on this topic contained severe methodological mistakes and that we don’t know the effect of Barrett’s esophagus on esophageal adenocarcinoma. I explained the mistakes in words and illustrated them with a causal diagram. To make the point, I even showed an analogy from pulmonary medicine. Clear enough?

At least one person thought it was clear enough. A reader (“reviewer”) for the *Scandinavian Journal of Gastroenterology* wrote the following words: “The manuscript is well written, clear, and concise...the conclusions drawn are correct...”

The topic I addressed is anything but unimportant. A diagnosis of Barrett’s esophagus is common and often leads to endoscopic surveillance and lifetime fear of subsequent cancer. The focus on Barrett’s esophagus has also shifted the attention away from the causal role of gastro-esophageal reflux.

Now, take a break and read that letter<sup>1</sup>, if you haven’t already. About 600 words, that’s all. Then, you will be able to judge the rest of my commentary.

First, I hope you agree that my text is earthshaking—*if it is valid*. This piece does not belong to the wide zone of “no big deal if doesn’t get published”. If the arguments are valid, the manuscript should be published and reach a large audience because the moral is startling: a research field in medicine can be led astray; grave mistakes can go unrecognized for years.

Second, if you understand methodology, please form your opinion about my arguments. If you think I have made a mistake—factual or methodical—send me an email and explain. I promise to reply. Otherwise, I may count you among an unknown number of readers who quietly and fearfully line up behind me.

Back to the story.

Convinced that my message extends beyond gastroenterology, I sent the manuscript (sequentially) to two so-called top general journals—*JAMA* and *BMJ*. Then, I sent it to two specialty journals—*Gut* and *Canadian Journal of Gastroenterology & Hepatology*. By now, you know the outcome in all four journals.

But I don’t want to discuss the outcome. I want to tell you about the way it was reached. Editors of these four journals—editors-in-chief or senior editors—rejected the piece you have just read with boilerplate text. No review. No critic. Not a word of scientific substance. Nada! By virtue of their power, each of them simply decided that my manuscript belonged in the trash. (Please don’t repeat the lip service “may be suitable for another journal”; that’s not *their* reason for rejection. Editors, like judges, issue a verdict regardless of what might happen elsewhere to the matter at hand.)

Next, let me share some of the wisdom in the messages I got. Remember: they came from top editors of highly ranked journals, from people who are supposed to have superb intellects.

One editor graciously allowed me to choose the reason for the rejection between

“...manuscripts judged unlikely to succeed through stringent external review or whose subject matter does not meet our current editorial priorities”.

I will choose the first reason; I like prophecy more than I like priorities. Actually, before choosing, may I see the list of “current editorial priorities” and track it over time?

A second editor explained to me that

“[we] have to make hard decisions on just how interesting an article will be to our general clinical readers, how much it adds, and how much practical value it will be [*sic*].”

I got it: the article is not interesting to the general clinical reader, or adds very little, or has no practical value. I will let you decide whether this clutter of words is interesting, adds much, and has much practical value.

A third editor wrote:

## Commentary

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"We have not sent this manuscript for external peer review as in our experience this is unlikely to alter the chances of ultimate acceptance."

Another prophet in action, but that editor also reassured me that

"...many perfectly adequate papers must be rejected".

I am confused. Was my paper so bad or perfectly adequate? Did someone bother to check the internal logic of a boilerplate email?

A fourth editor told me that the manuscript underwent in-house editorial review (Really? Who else read it?). Then, I was told that

"Based on this assessment, I regret to inform you that your paper has not achieved high enough priority for publication".

In other words, they don't just separate the pile into "accept" and "reject"; they assign a priority score to each manuscript and then check whether the manuscript ranked above the cutoff point. Really?

This set of quotes shows attributes that are antithetical to the essence of science: boilerplate text, verbosity, arrogance, prophecy, dishonesty, internal inconsistency (if not plain foolishness). You might have seen a similar collection in your professional life.

But what bothers me most is the quality of the editors themselves. Four top editors in four

prestigious journals were unable to recognize the merit of an original paper that challenged previous thinking. Did they deserve to be editors at all? How much methodology have they learned, if any? Were they cognizant of what they knew (and didn't know), or just pushed aside a paper that exceeded their knowledge? What body of scientists selected them to control the publications in their journals?

I have my tentative answer to each question, but you probably know the answer to the last one. Editors are not appointed by a transparent process. No publisher calls for applications for editorial positions. These people climb to powerful positions by hidden social processes: acquaintance with the right person(s), personal or professional relationships, being at the right place at the right time, returning a favor, and so on. Sure, they have *some* skills, but so do many thousands of scientists.

Unlike most of us, these editors don't pay for professional mistakes. Their decisions to reject manuscripts, using boilerplate messages, are accountable to no one. And the fate of scientific progress or scientific direction temporarily rests in their hands. Unbelievable? Scary? Outrageous? Pick the adjective(s).

### Reference:

1. Shahar E. Reflux, Barrett's esophagus and esophageal adenocarcinoma. *Scand J Gastroenterol*, 2014, August 6 (ePub)