

Peer Review

Introduction

Colleagues are usually the hardest and most demanding audience. To be recognized by peer contemporaries as a subject matter expert is a coveted research plane testifying to quality scholarship and professional noteworthiness. Peer review is one of the means of giving credence to one's continuing academic and professional proficiency. Over the course of history, from classical culture through the later scientific revolution and into the modern period, peer review has been one of the chief means of critical examination and scrutiny necessary to ensure continued academic and professional excellence. However, the peer review process comes with advantages and limitations. Successfully having research deemed peer reviewed opens doors in academia, streams of funding sources, manuscript authorship which all escalate the value of a research portfolio. Quality peer review relies on professional expertise and integrity to overcome the inherent subjectivity of reviewing others' work. Following institutional rules and guidelines leads to a quality review process and must be included in all Responsible Conduct of Research deliberations.

Definitions

The following definitions, from a variety of studied resources, are useful.

- Peer Review is expert critique of either a scientific or academic treatise, such as an article prepared or submitted for publication, a grant proposal, or a clinical research protocol, or of an investigator's research program, as in a site visit and is an essential component of the conduct of science and the humanities.
- Confidentiality refers to an ethical principle often associated with the professions (e.g., medicine, law, theology, psychology, journalism). For example, there are requirements in professions not to disclose information received from a patient, client, or source. The term "confidential" in Government usage often refers to one of the classifications relating to the potential effect on national security if inappropriately disclosed. To avoid confusion, the term "confidential" should not be used in Government documents outside of the context of clearances.
- Impartiality means being unable to gain any personal advantage from taking one side rather than another. To be *impartial*, an individual must not favor one side over the other or prejudge any of the facts or theories.
- Privileged Information involves information where there is a duty to refrain from unwarranted disclosure. It should be understood that the term "confidential" should not be used in the same context as "privileged" or "proprietary" information.

- Proprietary information refers to or relates to ownership. Proprietary rights or interests are the rights or interests that a person has because of property ownership or that are an integral part of property ownership. Proprietary information, therefore, is under limited right of disclosure, subject to permission of the owner of the information. Often, proprietary information is interchangeably used with “trade secret.”

Core Points:

1. All material under peer review is privileged information. One’s role as a selected peer reviewer means remaining impartial. Decisions predicated on peer review should be made as objectively and fairly as possible.
2. Peer reviewers should avoid any real or perceived conflict of interests that might arise because of direct competitive, collaborative or other close relationship with one or more of the authors of any material under review. If there is a question of impartiality or a conflict of interest, reviewers must discuss the matter with the reviewing manager or supervisor. Additionally, a Command Research Integrity Leader or Office of Counsel should be consulted.
3. The reviewed material should not be used to the benefit of the reviewer unless it was previously made public. During a peer review process reviewers must understand the level of desired protection of the information by its owner. Privileged information must not be shared with anyone unless necessary to the review process and permission to share the information must be obtained. Additionally, to whom the information was shared must be documented.
4. Peer reviewed information cannot be copied or retained. Privileged information should not be copied or retained or used in any manner by the reviewer unless specifically permitted by the owner of the information (e.g., articles, grants, etc).
5. The review process for scientific and technical merit needs to be rigorous. The process must minimize issues such as conflict of interest, and must maintain the privileged nature of the information under review. Individuals should also be aware that possible research misconduct might become apparent during the review process (i.e. plagiarism, fabrication or falsification). Very often, to ensure the highest quality of peer review, the process may involve dual or multiple levels.
6. Peer review policies and procedures should reflect the organization’s requirements. Peer reviewers must include subject matter experts for the diverse disciplines involved.

Points of Reflection:

1. Identify various procedures for managing potential conflicts of interest or appearances of conflict of interest during peer review processes.
2. If bias were suspected during peer review, what methods could be applied to mitigate or negate its effects and re-establish an appropriate and equitable process?
3. What processes should be in place to maintain peer review integrity?
4. What mechanisms should be in place to assure that peer reviewers protect privileged information?
5. Can peer review responsibilities be delegated? What are the advantages or consequences that may result?

Resources:

5 USC 2635

42 CFR 52h

Joint Ethics Regulation (DoD 5500.7-R)

Kulakowski, Elliot C. and Chronister, Lynne, U. (2006) Research Administration and Management. Jones and Bartlett Publishers.

Orans Dictionary of the Law (3rd Ed) West Legal Studies, Thomson Learning (2000).

Peer Review Process. Office of Extramural Research. National Institutes of Health. Retrieved on 29 June 2010 from:
http://grants.nih.gov/grants/peer_review_process.htm

Rockwell, Sarah. Ethics of Peer Review: A Guide for Manuscript Reviewers. Yale University. As found on the Education – RCR Resource Products. Office of Research Integrity, US Department of Health and Human Services. Rockville, MD. Retrieved 29 June 2010 at <http://ori.dhhs.gov/education/products/yale/>.

Spier, Ray. *The history of the peer review process*. Trends in Biotechnology. Volume 20, Issue 8. August, 1, 2002. Pages 357-358.