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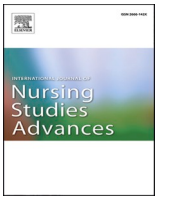

Editorial

# Quality peer review

Peer review in the context of scientific publications, as we know it today, was first introduced around 300 years ago. However, it took another 200 years before peer review was implemented across the board by most established scientific journals (Spier, 2002, Chapelle, 2014). Since the *International Journal of Nursing Studies* (IJNS) was founded in 1963, thousands of peer reviewers have supported the assessment of submitted manuscripts, making a significant contribution to the high scientific quality and impact of the journal.

Despite the acknowledged shortcomings of peer review, including lack of consistency and transparency, prejudice, workload, failure of reviewers to identify major flaws in papers and cases of fraud (both in the review process and a failure to detect fraudulent research), peer review remains central to the process of academic publishing. Peer review is a critical component of scientific work and seems likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Scientists volunteer thousands of hours of time to support the process. One of the main reasons is that only experts can meaningfully assess the work of other experts in the same field or topic. This also applies to nursing and the adjacent fields covered by the IJNS and its more recent sister journal *International Journal of Nursing Studies Advances* (Griffith & Norman, 2011, Norman & Griffiths, 2022). Peer review represents the core of science in the sense of constructive collegial scepticism (Chapelle, 2014) and this arrangement is reciprocal (Lockwood, 2025). Authors who have benefited from the peer review system in the past should act as peer reviewers in the future to support their colleagues. To repay the efforts of peers, authors need to undertake at least two peer reviews for each self-submitted manuscript (Griffiths & Baveye, 2011).

However, the usefulness and benefits of the peer review process are only as good as the peer reviews that are conducted and reported. Numerous guidelines and recommendations are available to support journal editors, peer reviewers, and authors to create responsible and meaningful review processes and outcomes (e.g. Kottner & Norman, 2016, COPE Council, 2017, Elsevier, 2025). However, there are no commonly accepted standards for undertaking peer review or for the writing of review reports. Based on a comprehensive scoping review, Sizo et al. (2025) recently summarized major elements in the conduct of high-quality peer reviews.

First it is expected that a reviewer reads the manuscript thoroughly to understand the work. This also includes any appendices. We assume that this is self-explanatory and the basic requirement for preparing a responsible peer review.

Next, the manuscript should be assessed using a structured approach. We have intentionally avoided adding yet another checklist to guide the peer review process, especially in light of the increasing use of Artificial Intelligence models to generate peer review reports. Currently reviewers for Elsevier journals are prohibited from using AI to undertake reviews because this inevitably involves sharing the confidential text of the paper with a third party. In the future AI may provide useful tools for checking data integrity, highlighting potential fraud and flagging issues for reviewers to consider. However, just as AI cannot be an author of a paper because there must be human accountability, it is essential that peer reviews are not simply 'done' using AI.

When reviewing a manuscript, a helpful starting point is to consult the journal's instructions for authors and commonly accepted reporting guidelines, which provide valuable criteria for assessing the quality and completeness of papers. This ensures both that a paper covers everything that is required to make a full assessment and allows the reviewer to formulate a judgement. As an example, a report of a randomised controlled trial should clearly describe the primary and secondary outcomes, a transparent sample size estimation, and processes used to allocate the participants to their assigned groups. The peer reviewer should ensure both that the description is adequate and that the procedure that is described is unlikely to introduce significant bias. Comparisons with published study protocols and the reported results should be also done, as protocol deviations or selective outcome reporting can introduce biases that would otherwise be hidden.

Given that nothing is ever perfect, the reviewer must form a judgement as to the significance of any limitations, potentially asking for revisions to clarify what was done, or to acknowledge or rectify limitations. There is considerable scope for exercising judgement, and while lack of agreement between peer reviewers is often seen as a major limitation, it can also be seen as a key strength (Bailar,

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1991). In addition to these rather technical aspects peer reviewers are also expected to evaluate the scientific value of a paper, its contribution to knowledge, which, short of fatal flaws in the method, seems to be even more subjective by nature.

While general comments can be useful up to a point, a list of numbered statements should be created next to help the authors to improve the manuscript. These statements should be clear and actionable (Kottner & Norman, 2016, Lockwood, 2025). Reviewers must consider whether the suggested changes are possible. Authors cannot repeat or redo the entire research project. If reviewers identify fundamental weaknesses in the research as a whole, we recommend communicating this directly and at an early stage. In addition, Sizo et al. (2025) emphasize key features the peer review report should adhere to: constructive, specific, fair, thorough, readable, courteous, objective, and consistent. This is indeed a very helpful summary to ensure a high quality of peer review.

Peer review is an integral part of scholarship. Although the attractiveness of peer review seems to be lower compared to other clinical or academic activities that may promise more reward, there are almost no alternatives to maintain the integrity of the scientific publication system. With this editorial, we would like to thank all reviewers and encourage all authors to continue to support this incredibly valuable system of constructive scientific self-criticism.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Jan Kottner:** Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Chiara Dall'Ora:** Writing – original draft. **Peter Griffiths:** Writing – original draft. **Ian Norman:** Writing – original draft.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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