

The manuscript peer review process

All manuscripts submitted for publication in Veterinary and Comparative Orthopaedics and Traumatology must pass through the process of peer review, prior to a decision being made to accept the paper for publication or not. All reputable scientific journals follow this procedure in an effort to ensure that papers finally accepted for publication contain data that is not only new, but also scientifically relevant and valid. This system of peer review can only exist because expert scientists and specialists in the various disciplines, voluntarily give their time and opinions. These people are called the *reviewers* or *referees*. It would not be unreasonable to ask why these busy people would make the time to contribute to this process; surely they have their own research to complete and publish. The altruistic explanation is that dedicated scientists and clinicians want to promote scientific advancement of their field, through the dissemination of new knowledge. Referees agree to read, evaluate and critique the written work of their colleagues based on the assumption that others will be willing to do the same in return, when their own work is being submitted for publication. It is a form of *quid pro quo*; this is an expression from Latin meaning 'something for something'.

The Editorial Board and the Board of Referees of Veterinary and Comparative Orthopaedics and Traumatology are composed of some 140 members. All of these people are recognised for their qualifications and specialist knowledge in their particular field of expertise. The way the system works in practice is that once a paper has been submitted for publication in the Journal, it is sent out for review by three referees who are selected because they are considered by me to have the expertise required to make an informed and fair decision about the value of the manuscript. The expertise of the three referees is usually quite diverse, which ensures that all facets

of the study are subjected to rigorous and informed scrutiny. In addition, all studies involving statistical analysis of the data are reviewed by one of the statistical consultants for our Journal. While we recognise that statisticians often seem to disagree about the best way to handle data for statistical analyses, we want to ensure that the basic rules of statistics are followed, and that appropriate assumptions have been made in the analysis of the data.

Since its inception, the Journal was unique in that authors are provided with unbiased evaluations of their manuscript by our referees. Our founding Editor-in-Chief, Geoff Sumner Smith, recognised that orthopaedic veterinary surgeons formed a very small scientific community, thus a double-blind review system of manuscripts was desirable. How this works is that during the entire course of the review process, all names and information in a manuscript that would identify the authors or the research group are eliminated from the manuscript. Also, the identities of the referees are never revealed to the authors. This double-blind system is designed to ensure that, as far as possible, unbiased evaluations are provided. This level of anonymity carries some heavy responsibilities for the referees to provide an evaluation that is polite, balanced, mature and objective; it should be entirely based on the science of the paper and should not be personal nor insulting. The recommendations of the three referees are carefully considered by me, and generally a democratic consensus of these three opinions is reached, in order to make a decision to accept the manuscript, or recommend minor revision, major revision or rejection. Less than five percent of manuscripts are accepted without any changes, and the most common recommendation is to ask the authors for some revision of their manuscript. Few authors are delighted by the many requests and demands of a referee; why would they be? Authors have usually worked long and hard to complete their research and burnt the midnight oil trying to write their paper.



Kenneth A. Johnson

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Not unusually, an author's stress is compounded by the need to have their paper accepted, so that they can sit for a board examination or apply for promotion.

I can vividly remember the experience of anxiously scanning the letters from journal editors in response to papers that I had submitted, and feeling angry that the referees had apparently misunderstood some aspects of my study, research, or manuscript. However, after putting aside their comments for a few weeks, and then taking the time to consider them with a 'cool head', I soon realised that most of what they had to say was fair, correct and extremely valuable. What I later realised was that the referees were not my adversaries, they were my advocates; they had generously given their time, expertise and wisdom to make my

manuscript much better. Referees are the 'expert readers' of scientific papers, and if they cannot understand what is being said in a paper, then it is unlikely that the average Journal reader will be able to comprehend the intended meaning. Simply stated; it is very rare that a paper has not been substantially improved by the suggestions and modifications proposed by the referees. Their comments and evaluations are gifts to be treasured. Of course the peer review process is far from perfect, but we scientists have not been able to devise a better process in over several centuries.

Fortunately the process of scientific inquiry is dynamic. While manuscripts published in scientific journals are indelible, their conclusions are not set in stone. They are always up for debate and reconsider-

ation. Readers of the Journal are encouraged to write a 'Letter to the Editor', and to comment on recently published papers. We encourage debate in this forum. Some comments require no retort, but we certainly give authors the opportunity for the right of reply in the same issue of the Journal, if they so desire. We must encourage this forum for scientific debate.



Kenneth A Johnson
Editor-in-Chief

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The Editorial Board of VCOT gratefully acknowledges the contribution of all referees who generously donated their time during 2009 in reviewing manuscripts submitted to

VCOT. The success of VCOT as a journal rests, in part, on their contribution and we gratefully thank them for their support.