



Ethics and Responsibilities of Peer Reviewers to the Authors, Readers, and Editors

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“Treat others the way you want to be treated.”

- Old idiom -

Survival audition programs in music, including Superstar K, K-pop Star, Miss and Mister Trot, and Phantom Singer, are very popular in Korea. They cover all kinds of musicians, including idol groups, folk singers, bands, rappers, and even opera and musical singers. I became a great fan of a recently finished music show entitled “Sing Again,” which was broadcasted on a cable television channel. The music audition and competition program offered forgotten or nameless singers second chances to stand in the spotlight once again [1]. The judges were veteran singers or producers from different age groups, to add a variety of viewpoints in the evaluation of the participants. Along with the surprising brand-new young musicians, the attitudes of the judges were quite interesting. They tried to deliver fair comments and unbiased decisions with warm hearts to understand the situations and feelings of the unknown participants, point out their weaknesses, and encourage them to perform better. Because the decision is open to the public, convincing comments are appraised from the fans; however, unfair or rude decisions may attract blame from the public on social media. These judges remind me of peer reviewers for *Vascular Specialist International* (VSI), and I think the peer review process needs to be more sympathetic and encouraging, with a warm gaze, like the audition judges.

The peer review system is considered an integral part of judging scientific medical journals, research funding, and academic qualifications. Peer reviewers play a critical role in the peer review process. They are invited to review

an article by the editors, and they usually volunteer their work as a gift to society or science and medicine without any payment or reward. Peer reviewers can judge whether a submitted article is novel and worthy of publication, without any publication misconduct such as plagiarism, data falsification, or unjustified authorship. However, many reviewers are not instructed as to how to be a good reviewer, or are not educated on their ethical obligations. During the last two years working as the editor-in-chief of the VSI journal, I found many good reviewers, but also encountered bad reviewers.

The principles of the peer review process of VSI are precisely described in the “Instruction for Authors” portion of the journal’s homepage (http://vsijournal.org/content/contributors/instructions_for_authors.html). In brief, the VSI journal adheres to a double-blind review policy, where the authors’ names and affiliations are not open to the reviewers, and the reviewers’ identities are kept confidential. All manuscripts are reviewed by at least three reviewers appointed by the editor-in-chief and the authors shall be informed of one of the following decisions: accept, major revisions, minor revisions, and reject. In addition, feedback after publication or process for appeals is clearly described. However, this process was not flawless. I’d like to mention briefly the examples of peer reviewer impropriety, which makes the position of editor an extreme occupation: 1) unreasonable delays in the response to accepting the invitation to review an article, and delay in the submitting of reviewer reports; 2) accepting or rejecting a manuscript too easily, with minimal critiques, within a short time interval; 3) misunderstanding the policy of the journal and the requirements for each type of article; 4) breaching the confi-

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Vasc Specialist Int 2021;37(1):1-3 • <https://doi.org/10.5758/vsi.213711>

dentiality agreement or pushing a training fellow or junior staff to review an article under his/her name; 5) unfairly criticizing a competitor's work, and requesting too much information; 6) asking for too many revisions that are either outside of author's reach or not relevant to the findings the author wishes to convey; 7) failing to disclose a conflict of interest; and 8) using ideas or text from a manuscript under review.

The Public Library of Science (PLOS) publisher [2] clearly recommends the basic ethical guidelines for peer reviewers: 1) Choose assignments wisely; 2) Provide an objective, honest, and unbiased review; 3) Honor confidentiality of the review process; and 4) Be respectful and professional.

Many international societies and publishers recommend the ethics of peer review, including the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), and American Journal Experts (AJE) [3-5]. VSI also provides "Instructions for Reviewers" on the website (http://vsijournal.org/content/contributors/instruction_for_reviewers.html). I would like to summarize the ethics and responsibilities of peer reviewers to the VSI authors, readers, and editors.

1) Confidentiality

The review process is strictly confidential, and all reviewers are expected to maintain confidentiality regarding the manuscript they are reviewing. This not only includes the contents of the manuscript, but also the disclosure of their identities to the authors or to other colleagues. It is therefore inappropriate to share or discuss the contents of a manuscript with others before publication, unless permission is obtained from the editors. If the reviewer had to receive third-party assistance, he/she should acknowledge these individuals' contributions in the written confidential comments submitted to the editor. The editor may approve the consultation of a third person if he/she has the necessary expertise to significantly improve the quality of review, is ready to maintain confidentiality, and has not been excluded by the editor for review previously. Reviewers should not use the knowledge or ideas obtained from the manuscript for any purpose (scientific, personal, or financial) unrelated to the review process before the manuscript is published. Reviewers should not retain the manuscript personally and destroy the copy after submitting their reviews.

2) Integrity, diligence and professionalism

The reviewer should carefully accept the offer to review a manuscript only when he/she is an expert in the specific

field and can finish the review within the predefined deadline. The reviewer should understand the aims and scope of the journal (VSI aims and scopes are found at http://vsijournal.org/content/about/aims_and_scope.html) and the peer review model. Reviewers must read the manuscript thoroughly and provide constructive feedback with a respectful tone to improve the quality of the article, regarding study design, methods of data presentation, applied statistical analysis, expressions to improve clarity, relevant references, and convincing conclusions. The reviewer's comments and conclusions should be objective and free from any personal or professional biases. The contents should be considered based on the facts that are being presented, and comments should be based solely on the paper's originality, quality, and scientific merits. The most crucial ethical obligation is the prevention of the publication of erroneous and/or unsubstantiated findings, which could mislead subsequent research.

3) Objectivity and constructive critique

The authors' efforts should be objectively assessed. Thus, reviewers should avoid negative bias and prejudice. Positive bias of favoritism, including honorary authors, specific devices, or procedures, should also be avoided. Because VSI runs a double-blind review system, reviewers should remain blinded to reduce present or future bias. If the reviewer has any conflicts of interest, he or she should declare and decline the request to review. Reviewers should avoid requesting citations of their own work for personal gain. The reviewer should avoid disparaging personal remarks. Do not blame, but criticize the authors to strengthen their manuscript.

4) Conflict of interest

Conflicts of interest that may arise for reviewers may include one of the following: 1) have recent or ongoing collaborations with any of the authors; 2) have commented on drafts of the manuscript; 3) are in direct competition with any of the authors; 4) have a history of dispute with any of the authors; and 5) have a financial interest in the outcome. Assigned reviewers may contact the editor if they are unsure about a potential conflict of interest, in which case the editor may decide whether it is appropriate for the reviewer to review the manuscript.

5) Vigilante of publication ethics

The reviewer should be familiar with the publication ethics. Reviewers should report ethical concerns regarding

plagiarism, fraud, duplicate publication, data fabrication, inappropriate authorship, or unethical study design and/or execution to the editor, with specific supporting evidence for their concerns. As described in a previous editorial [6], plagiarism in medical scientific research is not rare. The role of editors and publishers in detecting ethical misconduct is limited; therefore, peer reviewers' roles are crucial in maintaining publication ethics.

6) Timeliness

Reviewers are responsible for providing a review in a timely fashion based on the journal's policy for review. This includes 1) deciding to review the manuscript, and 2) completing the review within the requested time frame. Every effort should be made for the timely publication of submitted manuscripts.

This editorial is just the start of the reminders of ethics for VSI peer reviewers. VSI editors need to make a con-

tinuing education program for peer reviewers and an accreditation process for new reviewers. Training materials for language and English expressions are also crucial for non-native English-speaking reviewers, so that VSI journal article may be reviewed with clarity and politeness [7]. I strongly believe that these programs help improve the quality of the articles published in the VSI and contribute to scientific advances and justice in the field of vascular surgery.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Seung-Kee Min has been the editor-in-chief of *Vasc Specialist Int* since 2019.

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