

Editorial

Letter to Editor, a scientific forum for discussion



Almost all the medical journals have included a special section for “Letter to the Editor” or “Correspondence” in order to raise the level of discussion on their publications. Historically, articles published in this section have consisted of several categories depending on the journal policy:

Letters criticizing published papers

Letters written in agreement of the published papers

Letters criticizing or describing a hypothesis or a medical problem (not necessarily published)

Letters describing additional features of a published article (by the same authors)

Case reports and small series¹

In recent years, many journals moved toward denoting the “Letters to the Editors” as the letters discussing a specific paper. Its importance has previously been discussed and emphasized in the literature.^{2–4}

In scientific journals, all types of articles should typically be subject to a rigorous peer review. The aim of peer review is to expose the errors in the manuscript; however, this process has its own limitations. Two or three reviewers are usually required to comment on an original article, but it is often difficult to find experts on both the subject of manuscript and scientific writing. Moreover, an expert methodological review of a manuscript is usually difficult to obtain.³ Also, these reviewers are usually busy with their clinical practice, their manuscripts, and the reviews from other journals and may not have enough time to complete a review on its time frame. Although the role of peer review to present the scientifically valid information is not negotiable, the process may not be complete.

“Letter to the Editor” or “Correspondence” is considered a “post publication peer review”. It is a powerful forum of discussion between the researchers to show the errors and deficits of the study which were overlooked in the pre-publication peer review process. It is estimated that less than one tenth of the scientific articles feed with a criticizing letter to the editor.⁴ Ideally, this rate should increase to at least one letter for each research article.

The letter should be submitted within a few weeks to months after a publication. Long delays between paper

publication and a critical letter may decrease the interest of the editors and readers to the subject. An exception is when a letter describes a major flaw in the published material. Letters must be clear and concise and avoid unnecessary discussions and descriptions. They must not duplicate other published or submitted materials or include unpublished data. They are generally listed in the scientific databases as a publication. Therefore, the evidence against or in favor of the discussed subject should be strong enough to attract the journal editors and readers. Letters do not generally undergo a typical peer review, and consequently, they should not be used to introduce new materials. Those that agree with the authors or repeat the study limitations that have already been noted in the published article, and do not present new evidence are not acceptable or have low priority.⁵ The authors of the letters should avoid personal attacks, colloquial words, and impolite language. Commonly, the format of letters includes an introductory sentence, a body, and a concluding sentence. The authors should follow the author's guide of each journal on the preparation style, especially the limit of the word count.

Although the scientific content of a research article is discussed and criticized in future original research and review articles, letters enhance the scientific level of a publication. The letter to the editor is a proper place for trainees who need to get more involved in the field of scientific publication to publish their suitable criticism.² With the expansion of the Internet and development of social media in recent years, everyone can easily become involved in the discussion about an article. Although this is a unique opportunity to attract readers and draw out different ideas, the scientific pathways to convert the ideas to scientific evidence remain to be determined.

The Journal of Current Ophthalmology, like other peer-reviewed ophthalmology journals, values such a publication very much and urges all readers to submit their respected and esteemed comments to be considered for publication.

References

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26 January 2016