
Editorial: The Peer Review Process for the Association of Chiropractic Colleges' Annual Conference

Following the 2004 conference of the Association of Chiropractic Colleges (ACC), there were some criticisms of the peer review process that determined the content of the conference. While the majority of these criticisms were directed at the actual process, the basis for the criticism was the outcome of the peer review, rather than the actual process.

Observers of presentations at the conference made their own assessments of quality. Some of those observers noted that some of their personal selections as high quality presentations were featured less prominently than their selections as relatively lower quality works, and concluded that there were significant flaws with the peer review process. It is entirely reasonable to expect conference attendees to draw conclusions of this type. However, it is worth keeping in mind that the materials that reviewers rate are often very different from those presented. The presentations may have been relatively unfinished or unpolished at the time of review, and may have been significantly improved prior to the conference. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that peer reviewer comments actually trigger such improvements.

I thought that it would be of value to describe the peer review process for this conference. This year there were 115 potential presentations submitted to the conference. Prior to peer review, I reviewed each submission to insure that objective submission criteria described in the Call for Papers had been met. These criteria included word count, a completed submission form and author signatures. Only two were screened out during this process. All submissions were compared to check for duplication of works. There were two pairs of submissions that constituted duplicate works (same research, same authors, different ordering of names), and authors were invited to combine these. I performed a literature search by last name for each author on each submission to determine if any had previously been published, and identified only one such work. All works involving experimentation on human subjects were screened for a statement regarding IRB review and approval, and authors were requested to provide such a statement if none was found ($n = 22$).

All authors indicate the topical areas into which their works should be categorized. Volunteer peer reviewers provided information regarding their areas of content expertise and their level of experience providing peer review. Each of the 110 reviewed presentations were matched with a panel of at least 5 reviewers, such that the presentation fit the reviewers' expertise, no author was reviewed by an individual with shared institutional affiliation, and all panels consisted of a mix of novice, intermediate and experienced reviewers. Blinded materials were sent to each review panel. When reviews were returned authors received a blinded version of all reviewer comments. Additionally, each reviewer was provided with the same

collection of blinded reviewer comments, in the hope that reviewers would learn from each other to provide higher quality reviews and comments in the future.

Acceptance or rejection of any given presentation is a function of the rating generated by the blinded peer review process. It is not dependent on the design of the study, the outcomes of the study, the institution of origin or the notoriety of it author(s). This year we have received comments from authors stating that works that were rejected through peer review should be reconsidered for the conference because the results were positive, or because it was a blinded clinical trial, or even because it could impact next year's research budget at the institution of origin. None of these factors has, or should have, any bearing on the selection process.

As with any process involving this many people, instances of controversy are bound to arise. All such instances are discussed by the Peer Review Committee for the purposes of reaching consensus on how to resolve the issue, as well as to identify any problems with the process that the issue may have brought to light.

It has been suggested that this process might be replaced with a select committee of reviewers, in the hope that a higher standard of review and a higher quality of conference content could be achieved. However, this would be contrary to some of the stated goals of the ACC conference; specifically, increasing the number of experienced peer reviewers, providing scholarship opportunities for new peer reviewers and providing mentoring and feedback to peer reviewers and authors. For this reason I am personally against reform of this type.

However, since we have a concurrent meeting of two conferences (ACC and the Research Agenda Conference (RAC)), we already have the experience of both approaches. The ACC can continue to provide growth and entry-level opportunities for our research community with its all-inclusive approach, and the RAC can continue to provide a select program of high-level presentations through the auspices of the extremely competent ACC-RAC steering committee.

Hopefully, a greater understanding of the peer review process will lead to better appreciation of the outcome, as well as suggestions for process enhancement. The Peer Review Committee is constantly looking to improve the ACC conference and the chiropractic research community.

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