

Publish or be damned

The *Australian Journal of Physiotherapy* receives about three times as many submissions as it can publish. This means that (if you like your cup two-thirds empty) two of every three submissions must be rejected, or (if you prefer your cup one-third full) one in every three submissions is published. How are the chosen few selected? The procedures are straightforward: manuscripts are received by the Scientific Editor, who decides whether to send the manuscript out for review. Sometimes this decision is made in consultation with the Editorial Board. Manuscripts sent for review go to two expert reviewers. The reviewers are asked to make recommendations regarding the manuscript (reject, revise with guarantee of eventual publication, revise with no guarantee, or reject), and they are also asked to make suggestions for how to improve the manuscript. The Scientific Editor considers the reviewers’ recommendations and decides to accept, invite revision, or reject the manuscript.

The apparently simple procedures camouflage some complex decisions. Reviewers must decide if a manuscript is (or could become) the sort of manuscript that should be published in the Journal. The Scientific Editor must decide if the manuscript is amongst the best third of the submissions received.

An obvious criterion upon which to base such decisions is methodological quality, because methodological quality determines the validity of a study’s conclusions. Manuscripts that describe research which is valid or credible are preferred over manuscripts with questionable conclusions. The reviewers and the Scientific Editor screen manuscripts for methodological quality so that readers can have a relatively high degree of trust in the findings of published papers.

But decisions about suitability for publication cannot be based on methodological quality alone. Some methodologically sound studies present findings that are indisputably true but excruciatingly boring. Studies which tackle the big questions — those questions which have important implications for physiotherapy — are often harder to conduct and more controversial than those with more limited ambitions. Editorial policy and practice must ensure that review processes favour important manuscripts. We do not want the *Australian Journal of Physiotherapy* to publish papers that are true but boring.

In fact the Journal can fairly claim to consistently publish papers that are both methodologically sound and important. Some exemplars from recent issues are Potter et al.’s exploration of patients’ experiences of private practice physiotherapy (2003), Lacey et al.’s study of the prognostic value of tests for cerebral palsy in preterm neonates (2004), and Clare et al.’s systematic review of the effects of McKenzie therapy for spinal pain (2004). These are high quality studies with important implications for clinical practice.

Thousands of textbooks describe how to design high quality research, but few consider how to do important research. Perhaps this is because it is difficult to make generalised statements about why some research has a profound impact while other research slips quietly into obscurity. Whatever the explanation, judgments about the importance of studies are inherently more subjective than judgments about methodological quality. Consequently reviewers are often reluctant to comment on the importance of the manuscripts they review. Subjective decisions about importance are often left to the Scientific Editor.

The Editorial Board has implemented guidelines to help the Scientific Editor make decisions about the importance of manuscripts. These guidelines can be found at the beginning of the Guidelines for Authors (<www.physiotherapy.asn.au/AJPs>). The guidelines state that:

- High quality systematic reviews with firm conclusions are a high publication priority. However, systematic reviews are unlikely to be published if they find there is not enough good quality evidence to review or if the literature is inconclusive.
- This policy recognises that systematic reviews can be well designed and competently conducted — yet be of little practical importance. The most important systematic reviews are those which have clear findings.
- A more controversial part of the guidelines concerns studies of reliability and validity of clinical measurement procedures, and surveys of physiotherapy students or physiotherapy practice:

  Studies of the reliability or validity of clinical measurement procedures may be acceptable but are usually of low publication priority … and … Surveys of physiotherapy students or of physiotherapy practice are generally of low publication priority.

This policy was introduced because the Journal receives a substantial number of submissions which describe studies of reliability and validity of clinical measurement procedures, and surveys of physiotherapy students or physiotherapy practice. Many (though not all) are small, simple studies which are methodologically sound. Consequently, when such studies are sent out for review, reviewers tend to recommend publication.

The Editorial Board’s view is that such studies tend to be (but are not always) of relatively low priority. The Board’s policy reduces the need to make manuscript-by-manuscript decisions about the importance of such studies. And, while the policy may have caused some important studies to be rejected, I am certain that the overall effect of the policy has been positive. It has provided a mechanism for simplifying rejection of valid but trivial studies, freed up space for significant studies and, ultimately, makes the Journal a better read.

Over the last couple of years, when submissions to the *Australian Journal of Physiotherapy* have been strong, I have chosen not send most of these ‘low priority’ manuscripts out for review. This has, understandably, caused consternation amongst authors.

It is unavoidable, when only one-third of submissions can be published, that some authors will be unhappy with the review
process. Nonetheless, authors may reasonably feel aggrieved if the subjective decision about the importance of their research is made by the Scientific Editor alone. Consequently the Editorial Board has introduced a new policy. It remains the case that studies of reliability and validity of clinical measurement procedures, and surveys of physiotherapy students or physiotherapy practice are of ‘low publication priority’, and the expectation remains that few such studies will be published. However, authors of these sorts of studies who feel they have produced a particularly important study will now be given the opportunity to argue their case and have it heard by more than one person. They can submit, with their manuscript, a short justification of the importance of their work. The justification will be considered by the Editorial Board, not just the Scientific Editor. The Editorial Board will decide if, in its opinion, the manuscript is of sufficient importance to be sent for review. We hope this new policy will still allow judgments about importance to influence decisions about manuscripts but lessen the arbitrariness of the process.

A substantial proportion of papers published in the Australian Journal of Physiotherapy are randomised trials and systematic reviews. This reflects the fact that such studies often have immediate implications for clinical practice. In that sense at least, they are often important. Perhaps as a consequence, there has been a perception that other sorts of studies, particularly qualitative research, are not considered important. That is not the case; methodologically sound qualitative research that addresses important questions of interest to readers of the Journal are a publication priority. To emphasise the Journal’s interest in high quality and important qualitative research, the Editorial Board will shortly be drafting a new set of Guidelines for Authors written specifically for authors of qualitative research.

We hope that readers and authors will see the Australian Journal of Physiotherapy editorial policies and processes for what they are intended to be: a means of filling the Journal with reports of high quality, important research. There are many ways to achieve that end and some may disagree with our approach. We welcome feedback on these issues, either in the form of communication with the Editorial Board or as Letters to the Editor published in the Journal.

Robert D Herbert
Scientific Editor

References
