Article processing speed in the *Indian Journal of Dermatology, Venereology and Leprology*

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It is now time for some introspection—by everyone. We are publishing two brief reports in this issue that attempt to dissect the problem of long processing time of articles in our journal. The views are from two opposing sides of the mirror—one report having been written by regular, long-suffering authors from the dermatology department of a reputed institution from where articles feature in almost every issue of this journal and the other written by long-time editors, including the emeritus editor, of this journal, who have analyzed the problem as insiders, having the benefit of access to data which are not available to the outside world. As the perspectives and data available to the two sets of authors are entirely different, so are, expectedly, the conclusions. However, despite the divergences in the quality of data, analysis and reporting, we must acknowledge that the efforts put in by two unrelated sets of authors to scientifically answer closely related research questions referring to the turnover time of articles in the *Indian Journal of Dermatology, Venereology and Leprology*(IJDVL) is a stark testimony to the perception that we have an issue, indeed, with manuscript processing time in the journal and the time is ripe to confront it headlong.

What are the parameters or variables upon which the publication time in a journal—any journal—depends? Publication is a multifaceted process requiring meticulous efforts and planning put in by authors, reviewers and the editorial team.[1] The causes of delay in the process can be attributed to several reasons related broadly to one or more of these stakeholders.

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Dissecting the parameters of delay
General factors
A survey with researchers ($n = 1038$) carried out in 2012 showed that publication speed was the third most important factor in their choice of journal, after the paper's fit with the subject area of the journal and the importance of the journal as measured by the impact factor.[2]

Kalcioglu *et al.* examined a 15-year period of 37 journals and detected large variations in the time needed until acceptance. This period varied between 1 and 1195 days for original research papers and between 1 and 1145 days for case reports, which means that peer review has the potential to be drawn out for as long as 170 weeks, that is, more than 3 years.[3] Among major dermatology journals, the *Journal of the American Medical Association Dermatology* declared a median receipt to publication time of 133 days in 2017.[4] In this perspective, the average time of acceptance (for original articles, case reports and letters to the editor) in the *IJDVL* (5.85 months or around 175 days) may be termed as unexceptional, but something that can be bettered.[5]

As was determined in a slightly dated survey, 38% of authors noted that peer review, as a process, was too slow—19% of the authors were satisfied but 60% were dissatisfied if the length of peer review varied between 3 and 6 months; the percentage of satisfaction decreased to 9%, but the percentage of dissatisfaction increased to 80% when peer review exceeded 6 months.[6]

There is evidence that reviewing time is increasing across the journals.[7,8] The authors think that this is because reviewers

are requesting more data, revisions and new experiments or methods than they used to. The journal editors' viewpoint is that science itself has become more data-rich and the journals work to uphold high editorial and peer review standards.[8] Both may be right. In addition, journals are also receiving more submissions. Just to exemplify, in this pandemic year, until this day, the *IJDVL* has seen a total submission of 1088 articles compared with a total of 1105 submissions in the whole of 2019.

What can we do to reduce these delays?

The role of authors

The authors should submit meaningful papers to the appropriate journal. "Stop playing the submission system like a lottery; this clogs the pipeline with papers that are not matched to the journal," as Vosshall said.[9] A direct effect of hurried, premature, poorly conducted and improperly reported studies and scientific reports is a large proportion of editorial rejections. The reasons and extent of this in the *IJDVL* have been brought out impressively by Gupta *et al*. in Table 2 of their report.[10] If we take a look at the 10 major reasons of editorial rejection identified by them, we would see that *all* these are preventable in the sense that the authors could obviate the rejection, either by not submitting the articles either in this journal ("similar article published recently in the journal") or elsewhere ("lack of novelty," "flawed methodology," "incorrect diagnosis," etc.) or by taking adequate care while submitting the manuscripts ("poor quality images," "instructions to authors not followed," "text difficult to follow," etc). This is a major issue behind publication delay if we take into account the fact that as many as 55% of the submitted manuscripts in the *IJDVL* faced editorial rejection because of the reasons stated above, even before external peer review.[10] Being a dermatology journal, *IJDVL* puts a high premium on image quality, and poor quality images can doom an otherwise reasonable report.

Authors should read journal instructions carefully and prepare their manuscripts accordingly. This is particularly important when a manuscript rejected by one journal is submitted to another. In another revealing statistic, it was found that the reason for which an article is sent back to authors for preliminary revision is "not following author instructions" in as many as 97.8% of cases![10] There is a strong case for standardizing author instructions across journals to save on this avoidable work; however, currently, authors will find themselves well-rewarded for making the effort.

The authors should respond promptly and completely to editorial and referee questions and suggestions. If some data or clarification requested cannot be supplied, it should be explicitly stated rather than evading the question or providing irrelevant answers. If they disagree with a comment, it should be stated with civility and be backed with evidence. Proofs should be read carefully and promptly returned.

The ways and means by which authors can demonstrate responsible authorship and may play a positive part in reducing article processing time have been summarized in Box 1.

The reviewer conundrum

Peer review is the cornerstone of current editorial processes. Like all other leading journals, we greatly value the contributions of our referees. It has now become fashionable to disparage the peer review system for all that is going wrong regarding academic publication, including what some critics term as its "glacial pace."[9] However, peer review is irreplaceable in foreseeable future, and we have to live with that fact.[11]

However, in my experience, reviewers—good reviewers—sometimes forget that their role is to advise authors and editors to help them avoid publishing something incomplete, wrong or flawed. Ultimately, the authors are responsible for

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Box 1: Responsible authorship: How authors can reduce the article-processing delay

Be objective: Calibrate your own research/report before submission. Is it really worth the printer's ink or does it justify disturbing so many electrons? Sometimes, it may be really difficult or impossible to be objective about one's own work, particularly, if it has involved weeks or months of research. Take the help of a dispassionate confidant or peer, if you can get hold of one.

Choose the journal judiciously: Will the readers of the journal care for your findings? At least, make the effort of going through the past two to three issues to answer this question.

Thoroughly acquaint yourself with the journal requirements: Go through the instructions to authors very carefully. The more closely you follow article formatting according to the journal style, the more chances you have of your journal accepted in a short time.

Withdraw the manuscript early: If you find the early editorial/review comments too daunting and, probably, impossible to clarify to your own satisfaction, take a call along with your coauthors to withdraw the manuscript early. Do not wait for three revisions and four reviewers to opine and reject after weeks or months. This is unnecessary wastage of your own time and that of the journal.

Do not cut corners: While revising, please go through every point and answer sincerely. But always respond completely. An incomplete response always means additional rounds of rerevision. The same applies for carrying out corrections in the pdf proof stage even after the article has been accepted.

Be courteous in your interactions: If you disagree on some editorial or reviewers' remarks, state your reasons for disagreement cogently and dispassionately. Always remember, the relationship between the authors and editors should be one of mutual respect.

Mind your language: You are writing a scientific article, but writing it in English too. If you are not confident or the editors are not convinced in your language and writing skills, please have your article checked by someone more skilled than you are. If you can find none, please take the help of editorial services provided by publishers for a fee.

Pay attention to visual details: Remember that you are primarily responsible for the visual impact of your publication. Learn the basics of good digital photography. Go through the requirements of the journal regarding images. Do not be sloppy about image and legends mismatch etc. Images may be added and/or deleted during article processing. Therefore, be careful about this until you check the final proof. All these clerical stuff takes more time and effort than you can imagine.

Be timely: Always return the revisions and proof corrections earlier than the deadline. Do not create a situation where the journal has to send you reminders ad infinitum.

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the content in the paper, and they bear the responsibility of being right.[9] It is best to avoid fixating on minor details as this can lead to unnecessary delays.

We would also request referees to respond promptly when invited to review an article. They should decline immediately if they are unable to undertake the task, and if they accept, they must provide a considered assessment of the manuscript.

We may think aloud here: Is open peer review the way forward, in which reviewers' names and comments are posted alongside articles? Will it be the harbinger of transparency and accountability?[11] Will it prevent unnecessary delays too?

The dwindling pool of efficient reviewers, who deliver a good job in time, may have to do with one key factor, which is the pro bono nature of peer reviewers. Editors and the editor-in-chief may feel that they are unable to pressurize peers to complete a task in time because such peers are already being exploited for free.[12]

Box 2 provides a guide for reviewers willing to do their bit for reducing article-processing delay.

What is to be done by the editors
As described previously, the editorial process in the *IJDVL* consists of triage and primary screening, external peer review and secondary screening, postpeer review editing and final editing by the senior editorial team.[13] Given this process, which is perhaps a bit more elaborate than most comparable journals, editors take up a larger share of time in the processing of articles in this journal. However, given our twin concerns of inadequate quality of our average submission and our striving for excellence of our published matter, these many layers of editorial supervision cannot be dispensed with in the near future.

However, the single most important act an editor can perform to speed peer review is to avoid multiple rounds of review [Box 3].[9] Re-reviews must be an exception rather than the rule. This should be resorted to only in case of manuscripts where the handling editor lacks adequate expertise himself or herself and does not get necessary guidance from the peers during the first round of review.

One way to reduce processing time and conserve editorial resources is to be more ruthless in rejecting articles that may require multiple rounds of review and revisions. Manjunath *et al*. suggest that there should be a ceiling on the number of revisions that a manuscript undergoes.[5] However, at the *IJDVL*, we have consciously chosen to work with authors to improve manuscripts in which we see some scientific value even if the initial submission is of suboptimal quality. The process takes long and absorbs editorial resources, sometimes over several months. Often and satisfyingly, this effort leads to publication. At other times, several exchanges over many weeks lead us to finally conclude that the manuscript does not make the cut. Authors are usually disappointed (and occasionally upset) with such an outcome after a long drawn out editorial process; we are disappointed too but recognize

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Box 2: Checklist for reviewers to minimize article-processing time

Be timely: Once you accept an article for review, please try to finish off the assignment before the deadline. Please do not wait for repeat reminders.

Decline early: If you are not able to review an article, please decline the assignment early. This helps the handling editor to decide quickly upon your replacement if needed.

Do not exercise the option of not responding: This keeps the article in limbo, and the editor keeps on hoping for the elusive review that never arrives, especially because our current software records a non-response as acceptance.

Submit meaningful reviews: Treat your position as an expert advisor to authors and editors with respect. A single word or blank reviews with recommendations to accept/reject require recruiting new reviewers, significantly delaying article processing.

Box 3: What the editors can do to step up article processing

Send for re-review as an exception, not as a rule: Do not lean on the reviewers to check whether the authors have responded adequately to their queries. That job is yours. Ask for rereview by a different reviewer only when the primary review is inadequate.

Employ the FINER criteria early: Do not send an article for revision at all if there are questions on novelty, level of interest, relevance or ethical propriety. The same holds true for major flaws in design and analysis (provided you can spot it), sample size, diagnostic incongruity, inadequate image quality or significantly subpar language.

Moderate reviewers' remarks carefully: More than one reviewer, pressed into service, for an article, may give divergent views. Carefully moderate such reviews; otherwise, authors may find it difficult to satisfy conflicting demands and revisions may take a long time.

Do not be too much of a perfectionist: By all means, point out all mistakes, big and small, in the first review. By no means, be persistent on correcting minor errors, tangential to the main message, in editorial re-reviews. The time and effort spent on this do not justify the returns in terms of quality improvement.

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that this is the price we have chosen to pay with our editorial policy of choosing engagement over summary rejection.

Where does the publisher stand?
The role of the publisher in facilitating manuscript processing is crucial. A good manuscript management system makes for pleasant and quick work for authors, reviewers and editors alike. It is good news that, finally, the *IJDVL* is set to migrate to a new system that, we hope, will encourage all stakeholders.

After acceptance, but before publication, there are still several steps during production, including copyediting, proofreading and indexing, for which the publisher is responsible. Good copy editing and proofreading, carrying out editorial instructions consistently and cutting out redundant and repetitive steps will help speed the process. In the *IJDVL*, we have taken on some of this responsibility that is traditionally of the publisher. We have a separate team to correct language and make articles more readable and a set of editors to ensure that images appear optimally. In addition, we have employed a tech-savvy editorial assistant to help us deal with the current software system, perform a technical check of newly submitted articles and sundry other responsibilities of the editorial office.

Finally, an aspirational proposal for the establishment of scientific publishing: We are living in a global economic system driven by the rules of a marketplace. Still, biomedical (and scientific) publishing is ruled by an anachronistic practice, whereby, it is dependent upon pro bono services rendered by editors and reviewers. The tasks behind the publication of a solidly vetted scientific paper are complex and numerous. The actualization of this requires good management, respect, trust, courage and, most importantly, a lot of hard work and dedication by the editorial team members. Despite this tremendous responsibility bestowed upon editors, they are not financially compensated for their efforts.[14] This is, plainly speaking, exploitative. The result is jaded editors cutting corners, or procrastinating, because of lack of tangible incentives or a fading altruistic desire to serve the academic community. Such demotivation may go some way in explaining long editorial decisions. Perhaps, it is time that everyone thinks seriously in terms of compensating the peers and the editors for their time, labor and expertise.

Box 4 summarizes some recommendations for the publishers for accelerating the process of publication.

What are we doing to address delays?

Examples of new initiatives taken by the editors to hasten the publication process in this journal are a proposal by the editors to have an option in the newly developing manuscript management system for automatic seeding of the reviewer database by our authors, reduction in the number of redundant phases in the production and editorial processes, stopping the practice of multiple proofs being sent to the authors and limiting it one pdf proof for the authors of each article, and so on.

Conclusion

Knowledge diffusion is an intrinsically slow process.[15] Publication experiences during this pandemic have taught us that we can forget this truth and try to accelerate the pace of scientific publication at the expense of marginalizing, downgrading and, sometimes, doing away with peer and editorial review processes only at our own peril.[16] The turnover time of articles in a journal is a function of multiple variables, namely, the efficiency of authors, the average quality of the submission, strength of the reviewer pool, the responsiveness of the editorial team, the complexity of the editorial process and the culture of timeliness prevailing in the journal. Thus, the responsibility of reducing the turnover time rests upon all the stakeholders, namely, the authors, reviewers, editors and publishers. The two brief reports[5,10] and this accompanying commentary should be a testimony to the fact that the journal takes the twin tasks of introspection and self-criticism seriously. We wish to assure our readers that the editorial team is always looking for ways to innovate to reduce manuscript processing delays and ensure timely publication of evidence and data, without compromising on our editorial and review processes, to maintain and enhance the integrity of published data in the *IJDVL*.

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Box 4: Recommendations for journal publishers for speeding up article processing

What is sauce for the goose is not sauce for the gander: Big publishers with hundreds and thousands of journals under their belt seek to establish a homogenous standard operating protocol, keeping in mind the average quality of the journals they cater. This might be problematic for journals having much higher or more complex editorial processing requirements compared with the average quality journals with the publisher. For example, the *IJDVL*, which for the past 4 years is the highest-ranked biomedical journal published from India, has more stringent and complex editorial processes compared with the average quality journal with its publisher. Therefore, aggressive customization of set processes in manuscript management and editorial practices laid down by the publisher would be the key for this journal if it wishes to improve its functioning, including the processing time of articles. The publishers need to understand and support such initiatives taken by the journals.

A seamless online manuscript management system: Having and maintaining a smooth, user-friendly, customizable manuscript management system is the key to a quick turnover of articles.

A dedicated team for a journal: As a journal gets bigger with an increasing number of submissions, one or more dedicated publication personnel are required to provide seamless and fast office editing, graphic designing, social media engagement and production services.