

Transparency and accountability

EMBO Molecular Medicine is enriched by a number of innovative policies designed to enhance the editorial process: peer review process files, de-emphasis of confidential referee comments and cross-refereeing.

After spending endless working days, and quite possibly a few sleepless nights, on a research project, the brief respite after submission of the manuscript evaporates all too often with a galling rejection. It goes without saying that it is hard to be sufficiently detached to accept as constructive and fair a process that deems ones work as unworthy of publication with a few unceremonious words of wisdom by experts in the field or the editor. Nevertheless, scientific publication in reputable journals remains a key measure of scientific success and the predominant tool for research evaluation. Is this trust in the scientific publication process warranted? In our view, top journals are certainly good at selecting novel, innovative and scientifically sound research for publication. Importantly, a rejection from a journal is informed by considerations beyond the quality of the dataset, such as editorial scope. Thus, a rejection from one specific journal must emphatically not be taken as an automatic sign that the research was unworthy or of low quality; some excellent work is published in journals lower on the pecking order—a good few Nobel prizes stand witness to this.

EMBO has many years of experience in scientific publication and has developed a thorough editorial process based on excellent editorial advisory boards and dedicated and knowledgeable professional editors. This journal is based on the same impartial, but community proximal, process as the older EMBO publications. Each submitted manuscript is carefully assessed and discussed internally and for 30% one or more editorial board members working in the field are consulted. The average time for

an editorial decision at EMBO Molecular Medicine is under three working days. We follow in some detail how well papers published in EMM are received and how rejected manuscripts fare elsewhere. While the journal is but young, we are encouraged by our findings, which will be summarised in these pages once more data is available.

Many of the editorial rejections are based on our vision of the editorial scope of the journal and some are based on the premature nature of a submission: it is our policy that manuscripts should not be tied into endless rounds of review that may nevertheless ultimately result in rejection—with a delay that can seriously undermine the priority of the findings. For this reason, we will only enter manuscripts into formal peer review, which we feel may be publishable with a realistic set of additional experiments that take no more than a few months. We believe our referees have come to expect more mature datasets as a result, but we instruct them nonetheless not to raise issues other than those immediately relevant to a well rounded, high profile publication with sufficient depth and breadth. Please bear in mind that in exceptional circumstances, when you have concrete reasons for believing that a mistake was made, EMM editors do entertain appeals. Appeals are evaluated fairly and efficiently, but the percentage of overturned decisions is typically in the single digits. Please also note that rejection at one reputable journal is not the end of the world: if you are convinced that your work deserves it, submit to another journal of similar stature, but maybe slightly different editorial criteria.

EMBO and its editors appreciate that anonymous peer review is by definition somewhat of a black box from an author's point of view. While we remain committed to anonymous peer review, as identity protection undoubtedly delivers more incisive referee reports, we realise it is consequently the responsibility of the

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editorial office to ensure the process is fair. We apply due diligence in referee selection and we have a policy to follow-up formally on any concrete evidence of undeclared referee conflict of interest (although this has thankfully not been necessary yet at this journal). Importantly, we are taking steps to facilitate and encourage referees to comment on each other's reports, adding a further layer of information that aids the editorial decision.

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Many journals allow referees to add additional comments, which are not transmitted to the authors. There is good reason to permit such confidential comments, as they can reveal important concerns about ethical standards, data integrity, biosecurity or conflicts of an academic or commercial nature. They can also document well-intentioned information by a referee, such as an unsubstantiated hint of data manipulation. Nevertheless, they also encourage some referees to add a more explicit view on a manuscript than conveyed in the actual referee report. This puts the editor into the awkward situation of sending a report that does not accurately reflect the referee's opinion, while basing the decision on all input received. To ensure that

all relevant information is transmitted to the authors, we have now abolished the 'confidential comments' field from our referee reports. Of course, in cases such as those outlined above, a referee can and should continue to communicate important information directly to the editors.

Furthermore, we now explicitly request that referees who involve another lab member in the reviewing process, as part of the mentoring process, state the name of the co-referee. Please note that while we encourage co-refereeing, it is essential that that main referee also review the manuscript and sign off on the report filed. Simply delegating review to another lab member is not part of mentorship and cannot be encouraged.

In our view the reviewing and editorial process at this journal is constructive and informed. In fact, we will henceforth showcase this by publishing the referee reports, editorial correspondence and author rebuttals alongside a timeline

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of the editorial process. We have started this policy in September, and expect to publish the first 'peer review process files' prominently alongside the papers after a few weeks delay. We hope this adds as much transparency as possible to the process, and that it may help new referees by example. Of course, it would in many cases be more telling to include rejected manuscripts; alas, this is impossible for obvious reasons. Take a look at *The EMBO Journal*, which has published these files for more than 92% of its papers for well over a year now. If you have questions or comments, please do contact the editors directly at editor@embomolmed.org.

We feel that the peer review process is anything but broken, although much remains to be done to optimise it. It is a bit like democracy: imperfect, but the best system we can think of.



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