Reviewer's report

Title: "What do the JAMA Editors Say When They Discuss Manuscripts That They are Considering For Publication? Developing a Schema for Classifying the Content of Editorial Discussion"

Version: 1 Date: 18 July 2007

Reviewer: Marcus Muellner

Reviewer’s report:

This paper is valuable information and a pleasant read.

To begin with I will try to adhere to the 7 points outlined in the BMC guidance for reviewers:

1) The question itself is not new, at least not amongst the larger journals, but important and still unresolved.

2) The methods appear to be appropriate and well defined. I am not good in qualitative science and this is a mix of both qualitative and quantitative methods. The authors mention that this way forward is new and they describe how they involved qualitative and quantitative researchers. This new method is difficult to validate but appears to be plausible.

3) The data appear to be sound. Maybe hard-core sociologists would complain that the phrases were not taped but simply written by a person while listening – this might lead to omissions, misunderstandings and a potential bias of what was recorded and what not. I personally don’t feel that this is a problem.

4) The manuscript adheres to relevant reporting standards.

5) The discussion and conclusion is balanced and supported by the data. The findings, however, refer to a particular stage in the peer review process and I don’t know what this means for the interpretation (maybe a minor essential revision; see also below).

6) Title and abstract seem to be appropriate. I personally don’t like phrases such as “future research is necessary” too much and would prefer at least one or two concrete suggestions. I would call this a “discretionary revision (see below).

7) The writing is acceptable.

Generally I don’t have many comments as this appears to be a relevant study which was well done and written.

Finally, I would like to congratulate the authors. I work in regulatory affairs and drug authorisation and large parts of our work consists of review (I don’t use peer because the definition is very tricky in this environment) but the decision-making process sometimes is pretty obscure in spite of all the transparency increasing measures.
Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

NONE

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Page 5, Methods: “Some editors bring most of their papers …”:

How many of the 7,000 papers reach the discussion stage? From the information provided I can estimate that about 100 in two months can be extrapolated to 600 or a bit less than 10% of the annual submissions. Is that correct? Wouldn’t it be better if readers don’t have to estimate the denominator? Are these manuscripts all kinds of manuscripts (original research, reviews, editorials …) or just research papers? This information is not crucial but helps some readers – at least editors – to put the findings into context. [minor essential revision]

Do editors use check-lists when assessing papers? We had that when I was working with the BMJ (a very long time ago). If this is also the case for JAMA, what influence would that have on the categories? I suspect a strong one. Do reviewers get a check-list and what influence might that have on the categories? [minor essential revision]

Page 14, Conclusion:

Event thought the conclusion is correct it does not say enough, at least for my taste. Even though the editorial discourse is classified, the decision making process is not. What is the process for the other 6000 papers or so that get rejected before reaching this stage? I don’t think the conclusion needs changing but maybe you could add a few thoughts on this stage of the process in the discussion? [minor essential revision]

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

Page 5, Methods: “Some editors bring most of their papers …”:

How many external referees are used, at least in the average? Most likely you don’t have exact statistics but some information might give implicit insight. I assume that the identified phrases also turn up in the reviews. This information is not essential but helpful. [discretionary revision]

Page 19, table 1:

If publication space was an issue I would not propose this but why not having an additional figure, eg a pie-chard describing the proportions of the phrases in “science” and maybe one for “journalism”? If you don’t like that idea you might add
percentages to the counts in table 1. [discretionary revision]

**What next?:** Accept after minor essential revisions

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests