Author's response to reviews

Title: Are pediatric Open Access journals promoting good publication practice: An analysis of author instructions

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Revised manuscript (MS 1656658191460507)
„Are pediatric Open Access journals promoting good publication practice: An analysis of author instructions“

Dear Editor,

we would like to thank both reviewers for their helpful and valuable comments. Please find our point by point response below. We revised our manuscript and feel that it has improved considerably.

Reviewer's report 1
Title: Are pediatric Open Access journals promoting good publication practice: An analysis of author instructions
Version: 1 Date: 1 November 2010
Reviewer: Tove Faber Frandsen

Reviewer's report:
The interesting question raised in this paper is whether open access journals as a group have characteristics that cannot be directly related to how they are financed. In this case the authors are asking if open access journals are more flexible in taking up recommendations. The authors argue:
“Open-access electronic publishing has been associated with a number of editorial innovations aiming at improved access to and transparency of research results. [16, 17] Open access publications are generally made available online to anyone anywhere with no charges for access. They usually maintain peer review to ensure academic reputation and most recover costs by charging an author publication fee. We wondered whether journals adopting this new publication model might be more flexible in taking up the above-mentioned recommendations, which aim to ensure publication of research results in an unbiased and transparent manner.”

However, it is worth considering whether the financing model of a journal will have an impact on the content of journals. van Raan argues in 1997 in relation to electronic publishing developments:

As correctly pointed out by the reviewer, we studied whether a higher proportion of OA journals endorse certain recommendations that aim at good publication practice compared to “conventional” JCR-indexed journals. However, we were firstly interested in the amount and type of guidance given by pediatric OA journals estimated by the actual proportion of journals endorsing certain recommendations.

We fully agree with the reviewer that it would be worthwhile to analyse relationships between the financing model and journal content. However, this was not the focus of our present study. Rather, we wanted to find out whether the journals sharing a philosophy of free access to scientific information endorse recommendations of good publication practice and whether they do so more frequently.

“In our opinion, the new electronic publishing developments will not influence conceptually [the] main functions of scientific communication. Of course, technology will certainly influence, even dramatically, these functions, particularly in terms of performance and of mechanical improvement.”

Furthermore, Mackenzie Owen (2007) finds that online only journals such as the typical open access journal do not transform the research article by incorporating specific digital properties. On the other hand other studies can show an impact of electronic developments on other aspects of scholarly communication.

As already pointed out above we fully agree, that it will be important to investigate, whether publishing models will influence and transform the content of research articles and how quality is ensured in the era of electronic publishing (as discussed by van Raan) but we did not focus on this in the present study.
Studies investigating whether open access journals as a group have characteristics that cannot be directly related to how they are financed are extremely difficult to carry out because we are looking for a potentially small effect size between two relatively small heterogeneous groups of journals. The effect of OA is very difficult to assess and the great challenge is the determination of causation. A study that illustrates association is much simpler because in order to determine causation a study must control for the effect of other variables. This study includes data from the websites of the journals. The data is relatively easy to obtain and straightforward to analyse. However, it would be interesting to obtain the data suggested in the discussion that includes any additional instructions not available on the website.

*Given the exploratory nature of our study with a focus on guidance given by journals and limitations of the data set, we did not attempt to establish any causal relationships. We stress in the Discussion section that an additional survey of editorial staff would be needed in order to elucidate any editorial procedures not described in the author instructions.*

It could also be included in the study how the instructions are reflected in the articles published. Making information available on the website does not necessarily imply that the recommendations are being taken seriously.

*We fully agree with this observation. In fact, several empirical studies have looked at the actual quality and completeness of published articles, in particular before and after introduction of certain reporting guidelines such as CONSORT. We now mention this in the Discussion section.*

Finally, more disciplines could have been included. The article raises a number of interesting questions but on the basis of the data included it is difficult to draw conclusions.

*In fact, we plan to look at other disciplines in our further research. For our current study, however, we restricted ourselves to pediatric Open Access journals because this allowed for a meaningful comparison with “conventional” JCR-indexed pediatric journals. We also felt that this was more relevant for readers of this journal.*

Major Compulsory Revisions (which the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached):

- 3 -
The authors should provide an overview of the existing literature regarding whether open access journals have specific characteristics that are not directly related to how they are financed. Open access journals have been studied intensively in the past decade and a number of these studies relate to whether we can tie the characteristics of these journals to how they are financed. The authors should reflect on why open access journals should be more flexible in taking up recommendations. Why would authors and editors perceive their role in an open access journal differently from a toll-access journal in terms of the recommendations? Finally, the authors should reflect on to what extent a journal can be represented by the information made available on the website.

Literature:

Thank you for mentioning these sources. We now include more information on characteristics of open access publishing in the Background section and elaborated our rationale why open access journals might be different to toll-access journals with regard to the promotion of recommendations aiming at good publication practice.

However, we abstained from an extensive review of the literature on Open Access publishing in general in order to keep the manuscript short and concise. Should the editors wish, we would be happy to elaborate on that aspect in more detail.
Reviewer's report 2
Title: Are pediatric Open Access journals promoting good publication practice: An analysis of author instructions
Version: 1 Date: 15 November 2010
Reviewer: Sara Schroter

Reviewer's report:
Are pediatric Open Access journals promoting good publication practice: An analysis of author instructions.

This paper looks at uptake of editorial policies and recommendations by OA pediatric journals. The authors hypothesise that a high proportion of OA journals will adopt policies.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1) Editors’ adoption of recommendations on good publication practice could be influenced by resources and the size of the journal. Some journals, for example the top General Medical journals, are well resourced and have the capacity to keep up to date with recent reporting guidelines, policy issues, and best practice. This is not to excuse bad practice, but to recognise that some journals are run by single busy clinical editors. It would have been interesting if the authors had looked at size of journal in some way (number of editors, number of submissions received, etc). Editorial Boards also influence individual journal policies.

We acknowledge that resources and/or size will influence how a journal will handle certain policies. Nevertheless, it usually does not need much to add a web link (e.g. to reporting guidelines) to a journal’s online author instructions. This should be manageable also for smaller journals with limited resources (this opinion is shared by the reviewer, see comment below). We were particularly interested in the amount of guidance given by journals to their authors at first hand, i.e. in the author instructions.

2) A comparison is made with an earlier study of journals indexed in the Journal Citation Report. There must have been some overlap between the two samples as some open access journals will have been indexed on the JCR.

We double-checked for overlap between the two groups of journals via ISSN and name of journal. The only journal that is included in both groups is the journal “Indian Pediatrics”. We now mention this in the Results section of our manuscript.
I agree that journals with websites are probably more likely to keep up to date with all the recommendations and policies as it is easy to post links to other websites etc and more expensive to print pages in a printed "conventional" journal. But the issue is whether the journal has a website not its publishing model i.e. open access or not.

All included journals, both in the JCR indexed group of our previous study as well as in the Open Access group indexed in the Directory of Open Access Journals, have had websites with online author instructions.

3) The authors acknowledge the limitation of the small sample size. Due to the small size, I am not convinced that meaningful conclusions can be made about the role of open access publishing influencing uptake of recommendations.

We now emphasise the exploratory nature of our study. In fact, we did not draw a sample but extracted data for all the pediatric journals meeting the inclusion criteria of the Directory of Open Access Journals. We believe we could not come closer to the truth than by including all of them and comparing them to all JCR-indexed pediatric journals. We now discuss that future studies including journals covering other areas should be undertaken to determine whether the results can be generalized to other Open Access journals.

Minor Essential Revisions

1) The Discussion section raises several significant limitations but does not do much to reassure the reader that these limitations will not have seriously limited the results.

Thank you for this valuable comment. We have rephrased the paragraph on limitations and now describe more clearly why these factors do not limit our results seriously.

2) The fact that journals might refer to policies etc yet not adhere to these in practice is not mentioned. What is needed is analysis of papers published by these journals to see if they actually adhere to the policies that they are promoting (or not promoting).

This is indeed a very important aspect which we now mention more explicitly in our discussion. As pointed out in our response to Reviewer 1, several empirical studies have looked at the actual quality and completeness of published articles, in particular before and after introduction of certain reporting guidelines such as CONSORT but this was not the scope
of the present study. We now refer to a systematic review of these studies by Plint et al. (2006) in the Discussion section.

Yours sincerely,

Joerg Meerpohl, on behalf of the co-authors