
Editorial: Peer Review on the Internet

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Abstract

The Internet is the future....? Wrong! The Internet is the present! As quoted by K. Dallas: "The Internet is a great invention, but what is it for?" (1) It is estimated that by the year 2000 the Internet will be accessed by up to 100 million users (2). Does it mean that the Internet will replace paper print media? Most likely it will not!. It is clear that it did not happen with the invention of radio, TV, nor other forms of electronic media. However, electronic publishing is classified as a "type 2 innovation" - one which bears the seeds of the destruction of the industry which created it, rather than a "type 1 innovation", which changes the physical form of the product (3). So, what would be the advantage of the Net to all the academic users ? How does the possibility of electronic publishing change the behavior of the academic community ? And very important, how can quality of electronically distributed material be assured ?

The advantages of electronic publication are obvious. It's fast, easy, cheap and can be performed by everyone with or without computer skills (4). Unfortunately, all these advantages represent at the same time disadvantages. It means nothing else, that just everybody with little knowledge of web-authoring and with access to the Net can distribute whatever he/she likes! And the reader will have to decide whether this on-line material is true or not. This is not sufficient enough for scientific data. Some kind of peer review is mandatory. This is particularly true when patients or their families are accessing data in "hope" for a cure for a specific disease.

The Editors of The Internet Journal of Anesthesiology and The Internet Journal of Emergency and Intensive Care Medicine decided to choose a review system similar to the one currently used by print journals. The difference might be that the editorial board is represented by International capacities rather than by a mixture of national members. The readership is International and the state-of-the-art in medical

specialties may vary from continent to continent. Every article published in one the mentioned on-line publications is reviewed by at least three members of the editorial board in a blinded fashion. In addition, The Internet Journal of Anesthesiology is reviewed by members of the Society of Advanced Telecommunications in Anesthesia (SATA). The members of this society are not only anesthesiologists but as well professionals on the Internet and involved in many International on-line projects.

Many web-sites are currently distributing professional data. Some of them are publishing previously peer-reviewed abstracts on the Internet. Usually, these reviewed abstracts are easily to recognize and will be on a server of a medical society or a web-site connected to a medical society. Other publications may represent personal interest of the author or hidden advertising for certain medical products. The vast majority of web-sites will probably represent the efforts of a single person, a group or an academic setting to make professional information accessible to interested circles. Every effort should be made by all webmasters to clearly indicate previous or present peer review of the electronic transmitted articles. It should be clearly indicated who the members of an editorial board are. This will distinguish a peer-reviewed publication from other on-line data. Peer review is "aimed at making a publication reflective of the peer community, not the editor's individual preferences and scope knowledge" (5).

In conclusion: Information clearly indicating the process of peer review should be made available to the readership in order to help them judge about the quality of on-line published medical material.

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