Editorial: JCN 2004

Two things ultimately happen to manuscripts submitted to the Journal of Clinical Nursing (JCN): they are accepted or they are rejected. Approximately a third of papers are rejected and this comes after a process of reviewing by anonymous referees and the Editor. Papers arriving in the JCN Editorial Office are each allocated two referees who make recommendations to the Editor who takes the final decision about whether or not to publish the paper. Where quantitative methods have been used a statistical reviewer is often allocated. Manuscripts are rarely, if ever, sent immediately to production. Reviewers nearly always have points for the authors to consider, even when they recommend accepting the manuscript. This presents an opportunity to refine a paper and thereby enhance its clarity and contribution. It is the practice of the Editor always to invite authors to take these points into consideration. Only rarely do referees request to see a manuscript for a second time. Once the manuscript has been revised, the Editor will make final revisions and ask the author to take these into account before submitting the paper for the last time. At this point the paper is usually accepted and will be sent to production.

In some cases papers are rejected. One or both referees and the Editor may agree with the decision to reject. There are many reasons why papers are rejected and it is the purpose of this editorial to help potential authors to minimize the chance that their paper will be rejected. This is in the best interests of potential authors and JCN. Rather than list the reasons papers are rejected, some pointers towards best practice by authors are provided.

Guidelines for authors

The best thing that a potential author can do is to read a few issues of JCN prior to deciding whether this is the place for their manuscript or not. Reading papers that have already been published will give you a feel for the kind of material we publish. They will also illustrate the style and typical formats used for publication. In tandem with this it is essential that you refer to the Aims and Scope of JCN and to the Guidelines for Authors. These have recently been reviewed and updated and can be found on the inside front cover and the inside rear cover respectively or on the JCN webpage (http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/jcn). The Aims and Scope will tell you what we publish in a very general way and what JCN is trying to achieve. The Guidelines for Authors will provide more specific information about the different types of papers that appear in JCN and how you should prepare and submit them. The Guidelines for Authors are quite specific and there are some crucial aspects to presentation, which must be adhered to. Occasionally, papers that are not double-spaced or which do not have sufficiently wide margins for referees’ and Editor’s comments will be returned immediately. Other crucial aspects which must be attended to before a paper is accepted, and which it is best to attend to prior to submission, include the structuring of the abstract and, in empirical studies, that the way in which ethical permission has been obtained is stated. Empirical studies for which ethical permission has not been obtained cannot be published.

Review papers

Reviews form an important part of the contents of JCN and we are always glad to receive them. There are a number of ways in which review papers can be presented but some features are common to all. The least requirement of a review paper is that it encompasses a significant breadth of literature or addresses an important clinical, educational or policy issue. The methods of the review must also be specified in terms of how the literature was retrieved, its scope, and how the conclusions in the review were reached. In terms of the method, the databases consulted, the search terms used and the dates between which literature was included must be provided for literature that is obtainable in this way. If grey literature has been retrieved then the method of obtaining it should be specified including databases, mailshots to stakeholders and any other means. The inclusion of any other literature not obtained by the main search strategy, such as that obtained from reference lists or browsing of library shelves, should be explained.

In presenting the results of a literature review the number of initial ‘hits’ obtained in the electronic review should be given and, thereafter, the criteria whereby the papers were retained for review or rejected. The method of analysis of the papers should be described and the means whereby the conclusions were validated, if appropriate, should be described.

Reviews may be selective or systematic in nature. Those following the above criteria could legitimately be described as ‘systematic’ reviews. Given the development of evidence-based practice, certain international standard procedures have been developed for the development of gold standard reviews, such as those of The Cochrane Collaboration (2003). These procedures are set out in the Cochrane Handbook, which describes a systematic review as ‘a review of a clearly formulated question that uses systematic and explicit methods to identify, select and critically appraise relevant research, and to collect and analyse data from the studies that are included in the review’. Although the publication of such reviews in JCN is welcomed, we do not wish to constrain authors in the preparation of reviews. We encourage the submission of other types of review where the evidence is harder to obtain and where some of the above criteria may not apply. However,
precision in the reporting on the scope and nature of the methods used remains essential for all reviews.

Presenting manuscripts

Manuscripts must be presented as requested in the Guidelines for Authors. However, the guidelines do not tell you how to write and this is something that comes through experience and also by taking advice. The most accessible source of advice is the pages of JCN where you will see examples of the kinds of papers the journal accepts as being of the appropriate standard. You will see how to organize a paper and how to express concepts, although you must avoid copying the words of others without due acknowledgement. If you have any doubts about the standard of your writing and it does not meet the standards of JCN then your manuscript is likely to be rejected, even if the ideas you are trying to express are interesting and within the scope of the journal. It is important, therefore, that you try to present manuscripts that are as well written as possible with attention to style, grammar, punctuation and the use of English. A common mistake by novice authors is to write a paper using a complex style. The use of plain English and simple expression can greatly enhance the clarity and interest in a paper. If you think that your writing has any problems related to the above then the manuscript is not ready for submission: it is not the job of the referees or the Editor to turn around poor grammar or to ‘translate’ manuscripts which are written in poor English. There are a number of excellent guides available with simple but effective advice on how to improve your writing style (e.g. Cutts, 1996). The simplest step you can take to make your manuscript readable, regardless of whether English is your first language or not, is to let someone else with writing and publishing experience read it. If English is not your first language and your own English is not perfect, then find a fluent – preferably native – English speaker to review your paper… and take their advice!

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References