

Letter

## Desk Rejections: Not Without Due Deliberation

To the Editor:

We read with interest the article by Putman et al where they sought to find a correlation between the day of manuscript submission and “desk rejections.”<sup>1</sup> Though written in a lighter vein, imploring rheumatology researchers to enjoy their weekends and avoid submitting manuscripts on weekends, it perhaps unwittingly reinforces stereotypes and thereby runs the risk of potentially making light of the editorial process.<sup>2-4</sup> In this context, we as editors offer our thoughts on some critical aspects of manuscript handling and highlight that so-called desk rejections are in fact the result of due editorial process.

Regardless of the day a manuscript is submitted, in most journals it would not be passed to the editors without undergoing technical checks. At this stage, systematic checks by the journal staff would highlight issues such as a missing abstract, declaration, and statements pertaining to ethics and conflicts of interests, or excess number of words or references, among other things, and the manuscript would be sent back to the authors for modification.<sup>5</sup> This process might range from days to weeks and it is unclear how in the present study, this period has been accounted for.<sup>1</sup> Further, the study does not give any information on when the editors actually received the manuscript (ie, on the weekends or for that matter, any other day of the week). Moreover, it is not clear if any manuscripts were rejected at the technical check stage itself. Therefore, the inferences drawn linking the days when manuscripts were submitted to the journal and their subsequent rejection by the editors remain questionable.

Nevertheless, let us assume that all is well technically with a manuscript and it has somehow been passed instantly to the chief

editor over the weekend, who may have assigned it to the associate editors without delay. As with any other manuscript, it definitely faces the potential of straightforward rejection. However, the general notion that such rejections are done without any critical review of the manuscript does not have any basis. To assume that rejection in any way implies an abject failure for the author(s) or that it is an indicator of the dilution of the quality of the journal’s editorial processes is erroneous. The truth is that these manuscripts are indeed reviewed by the editor(s) and if anything, such decisions are quick and allow editors and reviewers to focus on good quality manuscripts suitable to their journal’s scope.<sup>5</sup> The factors considered here are the need, import, and relevance of a particular manuscript for the journal and whether the journal has published similar papers in the recent past. Such prompt decisions allow the authors to submit their work to another journal that may be better suited for their work, without losing significant time. The authors, therefore, need to be aware of the importance of choosing the right journal. For this, while several factors are important such as time taken for the review process, journal-related metrics, acceptance rates, open access availability, and any publishing fees, the critical consideration remains the relevance to the journal’s readership.<sup>6</sup> It follows that the authors need to be pragmatic in choosing a particular journal to which they submit their work, as research or a manuscript that is not up to its standards is unlikely to be accepted. As the appraisal of a manuscript is a dynamic process, the decision to reject it may be made at several different stages of the editorial workflow, in conforming to the journal’s right and responsibility to maintain the standards according to its collective editorial vision and policies (Table).<sup>5</sup>

It is agreed that editorial processes are not foolproof and noticeable deviations may occur, leading to some potentially good manuscripts being rejected (and in the same token few

Table. Various stages where a manuscript may be rejected and the roles of editors and reviewers.

| Stage | Editorial Workflow                                     | Recommendation/Rejection by   |
|-------|--|---|
| 1     | At the stage of initial technical checks               | Editor-in-chief can reject at this stage if there are any unacceptable technical shortcomings   |
| 2     | Before assigning the manuscript to the handling editor | Editor-in-chief can reject after assessing the manuscript   |
| 3     | Before external peer review                            | Handling editor can recommend rejection after assessing the manuscript  |
| 4     | At the stage of peer review                            | Reviewer can recommend rejection  |
| 5     | After peer review                                      | Handling editor can recommend rejection based on reviewers’ inputs and/or his/her overall judgment, taking into account the comments offered by reviewers |
| 6     | Before re-review                                       | Handling editor can recommend rejection without re-review if revision is not satisfactory   |
| 7     | At the stage of re-review                              | Reviewer can recommend rejection if revision is not satisfactory  |
| 8     | After re-review  | Handling editor can recommend rejection based on reviewers’ inputs and/or his/her overall judgment, taking into account the comments offered by reviewers |

Note: The first 3 are all referred to as “desk” rejections.

bad manuscripts end up getting accepted). Generally, however, major reasons for rejections have remained unchanged, ranging from a high degree of similarity to previously published text (plagiarism), poor methodology, poor reporting, to lack of any new information or substantial update of current knowledge.<sup>7,8</sup>

We suggest that more efforts should be made to make authors and researchers aware of the editorial process, reasons for rejections, and how to deal with rejections. In this context, at the British Society for Rheumatology's annual meeting this year in Glasgow, an entire session designed and delivered by the editors of *Rheumatology* and *Rheumatology Advances in Practice* dealing with the nuts and bolts of editorial process and rejections was extremely well received.

In summary, if one considers the foregoing discussion, it would be apparent that most of the reasons discussed in the present study in fact present a pattern whereby desk rejections were linked to lower quality of the submitted work. Thus, implying that submitting during weekends somehow increases the chances of desk rejection of a manuscript that is otherwise good enough may not be prudent. Our contention is that such manuscripts would be rejected, any day!

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This manuscript was deliberately submitted on an Indian weekend. The authors of this manuscript are editorial board members of *Rheumatology*

(VR), *Indian Journal of Rheumatology* (VR, SS, MG), and *Rheumatology Advances in Practice* (SS, MG). In addition, VR was the past editor-in-chief of the *Indian Journal of Rheumatology* and the *Journal of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh*.

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