Streamlining the Process—What's Worked

MODERATOR:
Michele Springer
Principal Medical Editor
Caudex
New York, New York

SPEAKERS:
Michael Lederman
Editor-in-Chief
Pathogens and Immunity
Case Western Reserve University
Cleveland, Ohio

Brit Stamey
Copyediting Services Coordinator
J&J Editorial, LLC
Cary, North Carolina

Dawit Tegbaru
Managing Editor
American Society for Radiation Oncology
Arlington, Virginia

REPORTER:
Daniel Nadolny
American Cancer Society
Atlanta, Georgia

Dr Michael Lederman's presentation focused on the various ways in which his relatively new journal streamlined their submissions process, with the stated goal of "making life easier" for contributing scientists. He began by recounting the vast number of biomedical journals currently in operation, and the enormous breadth of content in which clinical and scientific interests can be researched. In Dr Lederman's view, authors are the engines driving scientific research (and represent the true "constituency" of any publication) but are poorly served by difficult journal policies and practices. He identified several of the problems they face: onerous and unclear submission processes, slow pace of review, lengthy time to publication, fees, lack of access to content, and "overall anxiety of academic life."

Dr Lederman described how he and his colleagues addressed these issues in their field by starting a journal. He approached his dean with the idea, obtained funding, and worked to identify a qualified and dependable group of editors along with a strong managing editor. He outlined policies and procedures (utilizing ideas in place by established, successful journals and some novel approaches unique to this journal) and persuaded noted researchers in his field to serve as associate editors. Finally, his team built a website—and the journal *Pathogens and Immunity* was born.

His presentation went on to explain the relative simplicity and adaptability of *Pathogens and Immunity*. Its policies include a rapid, straightforward submission process (less than 5 minutes online) which includes the ability to submit manuscripts in any format. Authors can provide previously received reviews (and their responses/revisions as warranted). The journal's reviewers are paid for timely reviews. Manuscripts are published online immediately upon approval of the accepted final copyedited manuscript by editors and authors. There are no fees, all content is open access, and the journal is indexed on Google Scholar, PubMed, and PMC. The journal, which launched in 2016, has published 8 issues, 42 reports, and maintains a time-to-first decision of about 20 days. Its self-calculated impact factor is 3.02.

Dr Lederman concluded by encouraging editors to consider adopting "scientist-friendly" policies, and to consider what Plan S will mean for their journals. He said that scientists have the leverage to shape scientific publishing for the better, and he encourages them to send research to journals that simplify their lives.

Brit Stamey discussed best practices implemented by J&J Editorial during instances of system transitions (peer review systems, production trackers, etc.) and related personnel onboarding. She noted that the first course of action should be to determine all applicable timelines, identifying key players, setting expectations, and staying aware of marketing considerations. She stated that every step in the transition process is an opportunity for a journal to reexamine its processes. Be sure to identify the goal of the transition, and to keep it in mind throughout the process. She recommended doing a SWOT analysis (strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, threats) prior to undertaking any major transition.

Ask yourself the following: What is the date of the official transition? Create a timeline backwards from that date, which may include site transition dates, system/issue dates, marketing, etc. Ask for status updates from key players before major deadlines. Establish who the decision makers are, and who generally should be looped in. For journals, what editors need to be involved? For societies, who needs to be involved? Who can be counted on for quick responses? Decide how much say each party should have. Keep in mind how much time you have, your goals, the most important issues you want to rectify.

Brit states that communication is everything during transitions. She recommends scheduling regular calls, creating live and shared tracking sheets (Google Sheets, Dropbox, Trello, etc.) to monitor progress, and the creation (or refinement) of policy documents.

Set and temper your expectations during and after system transitions: no system is perfect, and no transition

CONTINUED

goes perfectly. Arrange for appropriate staff support during and after the transition, until it is completed and you are on the new system. You should determine when manuscripts can be submitted in the new system, when you will stop accepting them in the old system, when you will cease allowing revised submissions, etc. Work with your production team to create a plan for processing manuscripts accepted in both the old and new systems. This is also a chance to go over your workflow, your letter templates, your submission questions, etc. Be prepared for this process to take a while—many months or even 1–2 years.

Brit briefly touched on revising style guides by saying less is often more. Use a base style like AMA (American Medical Association Manual of Style) or Chicago (Chicago Manual of Style), and only note deviations from that base style. Collect questions you get from relevant parties, etc. With this (and all transitions), determine how you will use your marketing resources to announce these changes to relevant parties, authors, groups, partners, etc.

Brit also mentioned that when setting expectations for onboarding new staff, start by determining realistic goals and sharing them with the employee to better understand how success can be established. Work to foster team mentalities, even in small or remote groups. Get people to feel involved and supported. Encourage them to ask questions.

Dawit Tegbaru spoke about his journal's new conflict of interest (COI) verification system, starting with some background on disclosures. The Federal Sunshine Act requires disclosure of payments given to physicians from drug or medical device companies, and these disclosures are stored on Open Payments.[1] Most journals require that authors must disclose any financial or personal relationships that could bias their work. In 2018, the *New York Times* published several reports about prominent physicians who didn't disclose their conflicts in medical journals.

Dawit then talked specifically about his journal's experience, and asked whether a system in which corresponding authors gather COI forms, time elapses, disclosures change, etc., is the most efficient and transparent method of dealing with author COIs. At the American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO), Dawit's team undertook a process audit, and came up with a new verification method: asking all listed authors to confirm their authorship, asking if the disclosures reported on their manuscript's title page match what they submitted in their International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) COI form, and confirming that their disclosures were reviewed against Open Payments (Fig. 1).

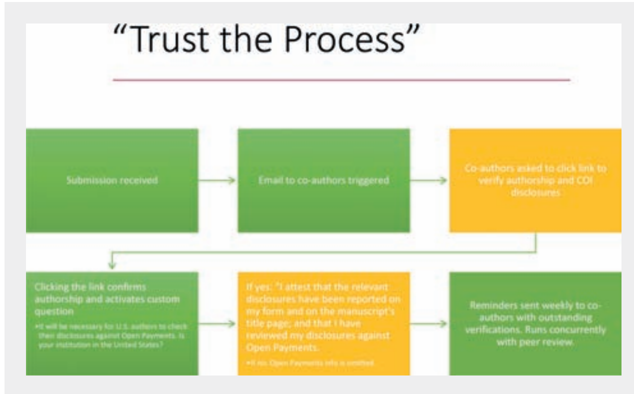

Figure 1. ASTRO's process for confirming authorship.

He noted that while some journals are hesitant to add more requirements for authors, ASTRO opted to be more progressive for this sensitive and important issue. For the ASTRO journals, all coauthors are asked to click a link verifying their authorship and disclosures. Automated reminder emails go out once a week, but the review process is not delayed.

Implementation was then tracked: The journals counted how many requests and reminders they sent, and then calculated the percentage of completed verifications. They were able to obtain an 85% completion rate over the first four months after implementation. They also monitored verification issues (such as links not working, incorrect email address, wrong option selected, login/registration issues, etc.) Dawit states that they have a great completion rate, and relatively few queries about it. In implementing this process, they've even observed authors wishing to revise their author contribution statement.

He concluded by asserting that their journals have implemented a simple, scalable, cost-friendly process that raises awareness about disclosures, increases overall transparency, and creates more opportunity to communicate with contributing authors.

References and Links

1. https://openpaymentsdata.cms.gov/