Prodding Tardy Reviewers
A Randomized Comparison of Telephone, Fax, and e-mail

Roy M. Pitkin, MD
Leon F. Burmeister, PhD

When peer reviewers do not file reviews by the time requested, most journals contact them to urge completion of their review. How should such tardy reviewers be contacted? This study compared contact by telephone, fax, and e-mail with respect to effectiveness in prompting completion of the review.

METHODS
The study was conducted in the main editorial office of Obstetrics & Gynecology, a monthly medical specialty journal, whose practice has been to send a manuscript to a potential reviewer with a request that the review be returned within 21 days of the date it was sent. When 28 days had elapsed since the original request, if telephone and fax numbers and e-mail address for the reviewer in question were on file and the reviewer lived no more than 4 time zones from Los Angeles, Calif, he or she was entered into the study. Using a computer-generated random number sequence, the tardy reviewer was assigned to be contacted by telephone, fax, or e-mail. Identical wording inquiring as to the status of the review and urging the report be sent by fax or e-mail was used in all cases. Telephone calls were timed to occur during the working day at the receiving end.

The main outcome assessed was receipt of review within 7 days of the contact. A secondary outcome was the number of days from contacting the tardy reviewer until a review was received among those who returned within 7 days.

Sample size was estimated a priori based on response rates of 50%, 50%, and 20%; to achieve 80% power at α = 0.05, 65 subjects were needed in each arm. We enrolled these numbers between January and July 1998, when analysis indicated underestimated response rate overall and overestimated difference among the 3 arms. Therefore, in November 1998, we reinitiated the study and continued it until June 1999 at which time the original sample size was essentially doubled. The χ² test was used to compare the proportions returning reviews and analysis of variance to compare the time for those returning reviews within 7 days.

RESULTS
The total number of enrollees was 383; 5 were excluded (2 reviewers claimed never to have received manuscripts and 3 claimed to have already sent reviews by fax or e-mail, but reviews were never received), for a final sample size of 378. The proportions who responded by producing a review within 7 days were virtually identical in the 3 groups (χ²=1.102, P=.59): telephone, 85 (68%) of 125 (95% confidence interval [CI], 60%-76%); fax, 86 (67%) of 129 (95% CI, 59%-75%); and e-mail, 84 (67%) of 124 (95% CI, 59%-75%). Among respondents, the number of days from contact to receipt of a review also did not differ significantly (phone, 4.4 days; fax, 4.7 days; e-mail, 4.6 days; F=1.49, P=.23).

COMMENT
Much has been said and written decrying the slowness of the traditional peer review system, but surprisingly little attention seems to have been given to the problem of the tardy reviewer. Bishop states only that “journals should have a form letter to prompt those referees who have not sent in their reports on time.”

Author Affiliations: Obstetrics & Gynecology, Washington, DC (Dr Pitkin); and College of Public Health, University of Iowa, Iowa City (Dr Burmeister).

Corresponding Author and Reprints: Roy M. Pitkin, MD, 78900 Rancho La Quinta Dr, La Quinta, CA 92253 (e-mail: rpitkin@greenjournal.org).
Opinions differed among editors of our own journal and other editors we contacted with respect to how to prompt tardy reviewers. A telephone call is said to imply greater urgency and perhaps importance. A fax, it was argued, provides a tangible record and, if the recipient were unavailable, a fax might be seen by someone responsible for the recipient’s messages. E-mail is a highly personal means of communication and has its enthusiastic devotees, and this, some contended, might increase the likelihood of a response. Our results indicate that, opinions notwithstanding, the 3 approaches did not differ in effectiveness at one specialty journal. Two thirds of tardy reviewers responded to the contact, irrespective of how it was made, by producing a review within 7 days.

Identifying Manuscript Reviewers
Randomized Comparison of Asking First or Just Sending

Roy M. Pitkin, MD
Leon F. Burmeister, PhD

I n recruiting reviewers, some journals simply send the manuscript to identified experts with a cover letter asking them to review the paper; if unable or unwilling, they may decline (“justsend”). Other journals query potential referees first, and only send manuscripts to those who specifically assent (“askfirst”). We are unaware of evidence as to which is better and authorities provide little guidance. Bishop does not mention the matter specifically, although his statement, “[s]ome journals send out manuscripts for review with a very simple cover letter, ‘Could you please review the enclosed paper as to its suitability for publication in this journal?’” seems to imply justsend. The objective of this study was to compare these 2 approaches.

METHODS

Setting was the main editorial office of Obstetrics & Gynecology, a monthly medical specialty journal. The editor chose 2 referees for each research article received between September 2, 1999 and May 8, 2000; if fax numbers and mailing address were known for both, the manuscript was enrolled in the study. Using a random-number generator, an editorial assistant assigned one referee to justsend and the other to askfirst.

Referees assigned to justsend were mailed manuscripts and asked to return their reviews by fax or e-mail within 3 weeks; if unable to comply, they were to telephone the editorial office immediately, and a substitute was chosen. Askfirst assignees were faxed information about the manuscript (title, authors, length) and asked to indicate their willingness by return fax. If they accepted, the manuscript and the same instructions and cover letter (asking for a return within 3 weeks) were mailed. If a referee refused or failed to respond within 3 working days, a substitute chosen by the editor was contacted by fax, and so on until a referee agreed to the review (up to 4 cycles) (FIGURE).

Main outcome variables were (1) proportion of initial referees who failed to opt out (justsend) or who opted in (askfirst), (2) overall time for the review process (days from enrolling manuscript in the study until review received), and (3) days between mailing.

Context Some journals routinely query potential referees before sending manuscripts (“askfirst”), whereas others just send manuscripts and allow referees to opt out (“justsend”). It is not known which protocol results in more completed reviews or shorter review time.

Methods Trial to assess proportion of referee turndowns and length of review process, conducted at editorial office of Obstetrics & Gynecology and involving 283 consecutive qualifying manuscripts. For each, a referee was randomly assigned to askfirst (manuscript sent only after affirmative response within 3 days) and another to justsend (manuscript sent with request to review; could opt out).

Results Only 64% of askfirst referees assented initially (15% declined [vs 8% for justsend, P = .008]) and 21% failed to respond within 3 working days, necessitating a replacement. But once manuscript was mailed, mean time to file a review was significantly shorter for askfirst (21.0 vs 25.0 days, P = .001); thus, overall time to receipt of review did not differ significantly (24.7 vs 25.9 days, P = .19), nor did review quality (P = .39).

Conclusion Askfirst led to a higher rate of referee turndown than did justsend, but assenting askfirst referees completed reviews faster. The overall time for the review process did not differ between the 2 protocols.

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REFERENCE