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

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In 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 (“just send”). Other journals query potential referees first, and only send manuscripts to those who specifically assent (“ask first”). We are unaware of evidence as to which is better and authorities provide little guidance. Bishop1 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 just send. 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 just send and the other to ask first.

Referees assigned to just send 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. Ask first 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 (just send), who opted in (ask first), (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 (“ask first”), whereas others just send manuscripts and allow referees to opt out (“just send”). 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 ask first (manuscript sent only after affirmative response within 3 days) and another to just send (manuscript sent with request to review; could opt out). |
| Results | Only 64% of ask first referees assented initially (15% declined [vs 8% for just send, \( P=.008 \)] 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 ask first (21.0 vs 25.0 days, \( P<.001 \)) and 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 | Ask first led to a higher rate of referee turnover than did just send, but assenting ask first referees completed reviews faster. The overall time for the review process did not differ between the 2 protocols. |

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REFERENCE


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RESULTS

Considering just the initial sample, of 283 justsend referees, 261 (92%) did not decline and 247 (87%) ultimately produced reviews. Of 283 askfirst referees, 181 (64%) agreed to review and 177 (63%) ultimately produced reviews; 43 (15%) declined and 39 (21%) failed to respond. The difference in frequency of specific declines (8% vs 15%) was significant (χ² = 7.66; P = .008). Viewed another way, whereas only 8% of justsend referees opted out, 36% of askfirst candidates did not opt in. However, the rate of producing reviews among initial justsend referees who did not opt out (247/261 [95%]) and askfirst candidates who opted in (177/181 [98%]) did not differ significantly (χ² = 2.72; P = .14).

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