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Peer reviewed

Honouring top reviewers, and what makes a great peer review?

Ruth E Malone

In this issue, we recognise the important contributions of a generally invisible group whose unpaid and too-often unheralded work is critical to the journal: *Tobacco Control*'s pool of peer reviewers. Each of the individuals listed below has provided a service to his or her colleagues that helped improve their work—many times in remarkable and unanticipated ways. No matter how carefully we do our research, no matter how clear we try to be in interpreting and reporting it, others often notice things that escaped us entirely. Over many years as a reviewer and editor, I have learned so much from reading reviewers' comments, including those of the other reviewers on papers I reviewed. It is clear that good work is a community effort, and as editors, we see the very best of that effort and its results.

To encourage even more of it, this year for the first time we are recognising eight outstanding reviewers. These individuals were selected by the senior editorial team because they have consistently submitted excellent work on multiple reviews, often reading multiple iterations of manuscripts, and in some cases working directly with authors to help them improve. The honorees include very senior researchers and rising stars; their collective expertise spans various disciplines and research methods as well as policy analysis and public health advocacy. Their respectful, thoughtful, insightful comments have helped authors, helped the journal—and helped the field. In recognition of their service, they will receive a free online 1 year subscription to the journal. The *Tobacco Control* Outstanding Reviewers for 2015 are, in alphabetical order:

Cynthia Callard: Cynthia has a great eye for making sure researchers consider how their work may apply (or not) to tobacco control efforts in low-income countries, and for helping authors consider the larger social and policy contexts within which their work matters. Her reviews are incisive and offer creative ways to address manuscript weaknesses.

Frank Chaloupka: Frank is a true workhorse. In addition to providing initial screening on economics-related manuscripts, he takes on a huge regular

reviewing load and returns prompt, critical, objective and useful reviews on economic topics that can be hard for the journal's multidisciplinary readership to interpret.

Rajeev Cherukupali: The journal is committed to trying to publish work from low-income country authors. Sometimes, however, manuscripts from authors whose first language is not English are just not competitive for review. On several occasions when the topic was a worthy one but the paper needed more mentoring help, Rajeev has taken on this additional, much appreciated role. He is also a stalwart reviewer of other papers—at least seven this year.

Kelvin Choi: E-cigarette research manuscripts have become more frequent submissions as these products emerge as a public health challenge. Kelvin's reviews of such manuscripts were described by a senior editor as always being timely, objective and constructive—no small challenge in a topic area that is fraught with controversy.

Pascal Diethelm: Pascal is another workhorse reviewer whose keen eye for detail, savvy grasp of the political and policy implications of studies, and thoughtful, considerate comments have helped many an author avoid pitfalls and publish successfully. He actually checks the reference list!

Janet Hoek: Janet is unfailingly kind and considerate in reviews, even when the ultimate recommendation is to reject a manuscript. She also has been willing to volunteer extensive time to help low-income country authors with restructuring and copyediting their manuscripts.

James Pankow: Jim's toxicology expertise and his ability to help translate key ideas for our broad readership have proven so valuable for the journal. He rarely turns down a review, and re-reviews revised versions cheerfully. His wit is a plus!

Todd Rogers: Todd has been a stats reviewer for the journal for many years, but according to one senior editor, his 'excellent critique with clever recommendations are worth two reviews!' Todd is another reviewer who almost never turns down our sometimes-desperate requests.

WHAT MAKES A GREAT REVIEW?

Each paper is unique, and there is no 'perfect' review, but a few things stand out: *The comments are phrased in ways that are constructive.* While a review is always also a critique, and there is nothing more disheartening to an editor than to get a review

that merely says 'good paper,' the way in which that critique is conveyed is critical. Even if you choose anonymous peer review (*Tobacco Control* gives reviewers an option to disclose their name to the authors if they wish) it can be useful to *pretend* your name is attached and consider whether you would still phrase the comments as you did. *The review is submitted on time.* Everyone is busy, but if you accept a review, it is so helpful to submit on time. Others are counting on you—not just the authors of the manuscript, who are anxiously hoping for a decision, but the editors whose queues keep filling with 'late review' messages and the other reviewers who made the effort to get their comments in by the deadline and would like to see the outcome. Life does sometimes intrude, so if you simply cannot meet a deadline, write to the editors and let us know. There is nothing worse than waiting on a review that is endlessly still expected or—as has happened in some rare cases—never materialises at all.

Comments consider methods, structure of the paper and its importance to the field. Often authors are so close to their work that they miss obvious methodological flaws. Sometimes they include results in the Discussion section, or the material seems oddly organised. Authors may have missed the forest for the trees. Reviewers can be extremely helpful in seeing and showing authors how to address these failings, and in elucidating the larger implications of the work.

Beginning authors often see their manuscripts as deeply personal work products—their 'babies,' as my colleague Drummond Rennie used to say. As such, they can hardly bear it for anyone to criticise. But once one lets go of the personal 'baby' idea and recognises that 'it takes a village' to bring a paper to publication, the peer review process comes into focus as an important step in making the work better. Both authors and reviewers can benefit from an openness to seeing the process as a collective enterprise aimed at moving the field forward, even if only the authors' names appear up top—and even if the paper ends up being published in a different journal.

Thanks to all who have contributed so much to the journal and the tobacco control field, and congratulations to this year's honorees!

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