When peer review becomes a bottleneck for young scientists

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For doctoral students and early-career researchers in medicine, biostatistics, clinical epidemiology, and trial methodology, publication is not merely a means of dissemination. It is often a formal requirement for thesis completion, a condition for career progression, and an important signal of scientific independence. Against this background, long peer-review timelines create a difficult and sometimes unfair situation. A manuscript may wait months for a first decision, not because the work lacks relevance, but because the system struggles to identify available reviewers, secure their agreement, and obtain reports within a reasonable time. Empirical work supports this concern [1, 2, 3]. Authors in one survey reported a typical peer-review turnaround of about 14 weeks, whereas they considered approximately six weeks closer to optimal; negative consequences were perceived as particularly important for early-career researchers [1].

This situation should not be reduced to a complaint about slow reviewers. Peer review is academic work, usually performed without direct payment, often at the margins of already overloaded clinical, teaching, research, and administrative duties. At the same time, submission volumes have increased, academic careers remain publication-dependent, and many open-access journals charge article processing fees while still relying on unpaid expert labour. The result is a mismatch between the demand for peer review and the capacity, motivation, and recognition available to those who provide it. Reports on the state of peer review describe increasing difficulty in finding reviewers who accept invitations, while editor surveys identify reviewer recruitment as one of the central bottlenecks [4].

The consequences are not evenly distributed. Senior researchers can often absorb a delayed decision; doctoral candidates and early-career researchers may not. For them, a manuscript held for months may delay thesis submission, applications, contracts, or funding opportunities. Recent commentary has therefore framed prolonged peer review not only as an editorial inefficiency, but also as an issue of academic fairness and career equity [5].

Several constructive measures seem possible. Journals should publish transparent metrics on time to first decision, time in reviewer recruitment, time in active review, and time to final decision. Recent work examining journals shows that review and publication times are inconsistently reported, although such information is highly relevant for authors when selecting journals and for evaluating editorial performance [2]. Unsuitable manuscripts should be desk-rejected rapidly and respectfully. Review invitations should include realistic deadlines, and journals should reassign manuscripts promptly when agreed reviews are not delivered. Reviewer contributions should be formally acknowledged, documented, and considered in academic assessment. In fields requiring specialised methodological expertise, journals could develop trained reviewer pools, including supervised co-review by early-career researchers. Where article processing charges are substantial, journals should also consider whether part of this income should support reviewer recognition, training, fee waivers, or direct compensation. The literature discusses both non-monetary recognition and monetary incentives, although the latter raise practical and ethical questions about cost, fairness, and unintended consequences [6,7,8].

Universities and doctoral programs also share responsibility. If publication is required for doctoral progression, regulations should recognize that editorial timelines are outside the student's control. A high-quality submitted manuscript, a manuscript under revision, or a favorably reviewed manuscript may in some cases be a fairer indicator of doctoral achievement than final acceptance alone.

The goal should not be faster peer review at any price. The goal should be timely, competent, transparent, and respectful review. Peer review remains essential for clinical and methodological science, but its sustainability requires that the work of reviewing is no longer treated as an invisible and unlimited resource.

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