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Nursing Children and Young People - Research Essentials

Responding and learning from peer review feedback

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Aim of the article: To outline the peer review process in a research context, and using feedback constructively

The essentials

What is peer review in research?

Peer review is essential in the process of ensuring excellent and high quality research. Peer review is the process of assessing the scientific quality of a research proposal, research report and/or paper by an independent expert, usually an academic or clinical expert. For example grant applications submitted to the National Institute of Healthcare Research are sent to a range of independent reviewers who work in the field and patient and public service users, who evaluate the proposed study. Reports from reviewers inform the funding decision by the panel.

Why is peer review important?

Peer review is a central component of healthcare and professional practice, and can include:

- Self-regulation process for maintaining professional registration: for example the revalidation of nurses with the Nursing Midwifery Council requires confirmation to practice by another qualified nurse;
- Evaluation of the standards of patient of care by a group of professionals such the Care Quality Commission; Review
- Scholarly activities which could include critical appraisal of textbooks and journal articles suitability for publication;
- Research reviews including research proposal and grant application, research ethics committee reviews and outputs from research such as journal articles.

In the broadest sense the purpose of peer review aims to maintain professional standards, improve quality of care and practitioner performance. In addition, in the research setting the peer review process ensures resources only support robust and viable research proposals, and adds to the credibility of research accepted for publications. The process of designing research studies includes receiving feedback from peers, service users, funding bodies and ethics committees, which contribute to developing robust research. From an individual perspective constructive feedback can; facilitate increased self-awareness, be a learning opportunity, motivating, and provide guidance for future development plans.

What influences reviewers' judgements of research?

Funding bodies and journals will have criteria that reviewers use to make judgements about the importance and relevance of the study to patient care, the appropriateness of the research design and methods (Box 1) (National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) Reviewer Assessment Form: guidance for providing a review (professional contributors), 2016).

Box 1: Key areas that peer reviewers consider when evaluating research

Research proposal	Journal articles
<p>At a glance: how important is the project, can the team deliver the project, can the organisation support the project?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is this research timely? • Is the justification for the research clear and does it identify a gap in the evidence? • Is there coherence between the design and methods, and are the methods appropriate and adequate to enable the research question to be answered? • Is the plain English summary written at the appropriate level for a lay person to understand? • Are the recruitment strategies appropriate and will they minimise bias? • What are the ethical implications of the project and how will they be addressed? • Has there been meaningful public patient engagement? • How will the project benefit patients care? • Is the project value for money? • Are the findings likely to be relevant to clinical practice? • Is the dissemination plan included and feasible? 	<p>At a glance: is the article well written, in the journal style and will it engage the reader? Are there any significant flaws in the research design and application of the methods? How does the study add to or advance knowledge?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the title representative of the study presented? • Is the abstract structured appropriately for the journal? • Is the study rationale clearly presented and the background literature adequately summarised? • Is the study design appropriate and methods clearly outlined? • Has the sample been adequately explained? • Have the findings been clear stated? • Does the discussion researchers place the findings within the context of other related research and/or current policy directives? • Have the strengths and limitations of the research been outlined? • Are the implications for practice clearly presented?

Responding to review comments

Peer review should not be punitive; critical feedback which praises but suggests improvements or highlights potential concerns is an important learning opportunity and can lead to developing a more robust research proposal or lead to a better quality article. Box 2 suggests some ways to act on feedback to enhance your research or article. Additional tips can be found in the resources provided at the end of the article.

Box 2: Strategies for responding to feedback constructively

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thank the reviewer: even if you are disappointed and do not perceive comments are justified, something can always be gained from reviewer comments • Highlight any good and useful points made by the reviewer • Summarise key points in a way that is meaningful to you • Access and utilise any resources suggested, a broader perspective can enhance a study • Do not be worried about disagreeing with the reviewer as long as the reason is justified – use

moderated language and not an aggressive tone

Key messages

- Peer reviewing is essential in research to ensure patient and public safety.
- Peer reviews provide a benchmark for a consistency in the quality of research undertaken
- Peer review is usually a confidential process
- Responding to peer review can enhance the quality of the research proposal/paper

Geek speak

Peer review: in simple terms is the evaluation of your work by one or more people of similar competence or who have expertise in the same area of practice.

References

National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) Evaluation Trials and Studies Coordinating Centre (2016) Reviewer Assessment Form: guidance for providing a review (professional contributors)

Resources

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Useful Websites

Peer / Scientific review of research and the role of NRES Research Ethics Committees <http://www.hra.nhs.uk/documents/2013/08/peer-scientific-review-of-research-and-the-role-of-nres-research-ethics-committees-recs.pdf>