Addressing conflicts of interest and clouding of objectivity: BJSM’s “Peer review: fair review” section

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You know that feeling. You have spent months raising the funds for your research study, writing the protocol and having it approved by your ethics committee. Then you spent a year or more completing the research and writing up your results. Then finally you press ‘send!’ and your sacred manuscript is winging its way across cyberspace to the journal of your choice. Your feeling of relief is immense and for a short time you turn your mind to other pursuits.

Then with what appears to be quite rude alacrity, you receive the email from the journal. Your heart sinks as you assimilate the rejection. The editor informs you that your manuscript has been reviewed by two or more of the world’s most eminent authorities on the topic. Unfortunately none sees value in your study which is “too speculative” and does not fit with what “is already known about the topic”. Then to add further insult, the editor states that your study is about the topic. Unfortunately none sees value in any case of too low an impact to be of interest to the readers of the journal. In any case of too low an impact to be of interest like everybody else. Our response should not be to pretend they don’t exist but rather to acknowledge and disclose them always, and sometimes to accept that they are so extreme that the doctor should not treat a particular patient or an author write an editorial in a medical journal. To this we add that conflicts of interest should exclude some reviewers from reviewing certain submissions.

As authors, we have all suffered the experience we outline at the beginning of this Warm up. Thus, as editors, we strive to offer you a transparent, fair system. When you submit your article to this special section of the journal, we will assure you that however outrageous your theory, it will receive a fair review from those who have no conflict of interest in this review. We will listen to your suggestion of reviewers who will gain no benefit from either the publication or the rejection of your valued contribution.

The British Journal of Sports Medicine is proud of the independence of its review process, which we believe to be as fair as can be found in the exercise sciences and sports medicine. But we want to do more to ensure that your controversial and challenging work is not buried simply because it is too challenging and too controversial. So, if you believe your idea is being suppressed by an unfair peer-review process, this is the section of the journal for you.

Submit your manuscript with a cover note directing it to the “peer-review: fair review” section. You may confidentially list names of reviewers who you feel are unsuitable. We commit BJSM to encouraging debate and providing a “safe place” for ideas that are supported by evidence but considered “too radical” elsewhere. We want to be certain that if we tell you that BJSM cannot publish your work, it is not because a conflict of interest is sabotaging the peer-review system.

REFERENCES