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COVID-19: a stress test for trust in science

Peer Review Week is the annual celebration of the importance of peer review, running Sept 21–25. The theme this year is trust in peer review, a particularly appropriate focus during the COVID-19 pandemic. Trust in research and its role in political decision making and policy changes have never been more at the forefront of public discussion and scrutiny than during the current public health crisis. But what is everyone's role in strengthening this trust?

Peer review has a central role in scientific publishing. We are extremely grateful to our peer reviewers for their expertise, time, wisdom, and willingness to provide constructive criticism, helping us select papers to publish and assist authors in improving their manuscripts. Peer review is under-recognised as an essential academic activity. The COVID-19 pandemic has made finding reviewers, and especially fulfilling our pledges on gender and geographical diversity, particularly challenging. Women have disproportionately taken on the burden of child and family care while working from home, with little additional time for non-essential academic tasks. Many health-care workers in low-income and middle-income countries are too overwhelmed with clinical duties to find time for research or peer review.

Equally our editors, many of whom are women, have been coordinating our 21 journals under difficult circumstances while largely working from home for more than 6 months. In some cases, we have had five times as many submissions as usual, and have had to rapidly publish important work without compromising our usual quality checks or publication processes. We have encouraged and facilitated global medical conversations among the scientific community in our Comment and Correspondence sections, including research-based ideas, as a new way to advance understanding about COVID-19 as quickly as possible. Furthermore, we have attempted to ensure honest reporting of research findings, including to the press and general public.

Science is a powerful and positive force in society; it shapes the present, and it guides our future. Politicians and policy makers rely on published research at critical moments of crises and emergency to guide their actions. And peer review remains essential to the scientific publishing process. It binds authors, editors, reviewers,

and readers together, and helps to build trust between them.

Retraction, although often thought of in negative terms, is also an important and necessary part of post-publication accountability, and quick, decisive action can preserve trust when it is imperilled. Even so, as editors, with a responsibility for the scientific record, we aim to learn whenever we can how we might reduce risks and improve processes and understanding, including around peer review. For one, we can do more to explain how journals function and what different types of published papers mean to a wider audience. COVID-19 has thrust many of the discussions around science publishing into the public domain in an unprecedented way. Articulating the importance of peer review—how it benefits science and society, and its achievements and its limitations—is essential to engendering trust.

Therefore, to coincide with Peer Review Week 2020, we have created a new online resource for a broad audience to explain our editorial processes and policies. Additionally, we have illustrated the journey of a paper through our system as an infographic, outlining our different types of papers, such as Comments, Editorials, news items, and letters, and what can be concluded from them.

Preprints have been subject to particularly polarised discussion during the COVID-19 pandemic, with both positive and negative aspects brought to light. Preprints enable researchers to disseminate important research quickly and accessibly so that others can build on their findings and perhaps collaborate. However, without peer review and editorial scrutiny, some findings might be entirely unreliable and even dangerous for public health. Overall, we believe that preprints are an important part of the move to open science and we will continue our offering of Preprints with *The Lancet*, stressing the importance of explaining their preliminary nature.

This pandemic has had an enormous effect on collaborative, adaptive, and rapid research, rapid publication of important findings and scientific ideas, and public interest in and scrutiny of research and science. If we can continue to work together to strengthen research and trust in science with the ultimate goal of using the best science for better lives, then the pandemic could have an unexpected positive side-effect. ■ *The Lancet*



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For more on preprints with *The Lancet* see [Comment](#) page 805

For the *Lancet* editors on lessons learned from the retraction of Mehra and colleagues' paper see [Comment](#) *Lancet* 2020; published online Sept 17. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)31958-9](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31958-9)

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