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Turning The Tables

"A good critic is like a sorcerer who makes some hidden spring gush forth unexpectedly beneath our feet."

Francois Mauriac

As an author, I frequently have the humbling experience of "being on the other side of the table." Recently, an article from my laboratory was returned from another journal with "requests for revisions." After several hours of researching points that, while interesting, seemed not at all relevant to the major thesis of the paper, I found myself contemplating the feelings that all authors have when faced with requests for revisions. The major themes of reviewers are similar, requests for reanalysis of data, additional discussion, more experiments, and rewriting for clarity and brevity. Sometimes these suggestions offer opportunities to strengthen the manuscript, while at other times they seem pointless.

While authors generally respond to a letter requesting changes with some satisfaction, that feeling quickly melts as they read the review and contemplate the effort required to make the revisions. Reviewers regularly see things in manuscripts that are overstated, underanalyzed, or incorrect. Responding to the reviewers' comments frequently requires nearly as much work as the original piece of research. Aside from writing the original manuscript, one of the most important decisions an author can make is deciding how the reviewers' comments should be addressed. Even the editor's suggestions about revisions, while helpful, cannot replace the author's judgement about how to revise.

Determining whether the revised manuscript is suitable for publication is another complex problem. While scientific articles are not expected to be great literature, clarity, brevity, and novelty help. The editorial board must decide if the revisions improved the manuscript to a sufficient degree to merit publication. The criteria for judging revised manuscripts are complex, but encompasses both the quality and completeness of the response.

Should authors perform this much additional work on their data? Unfortunately, the answer is yes! Years after the article has been published, the authors may look at the document and appreciate how important it was to have an experienced, unbiased reviewer suggest that time-consuming reassessment of their research.

Now that I have viewed the problem objectively, it is time to complete the reanalysis of my data as suggested by the ★✓!#@#☆ reviewers.

H. William Strauss
Editor, The Journal of Nuclear Medicine