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## The Editor's Role in Preventing Gender Bias in Scientific Journals: A Challenge

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## OPINION

# The editor's role in preventing gender bias

Mary E. Guinan, MD, PhD



One way to explore whether gender bias exists in the process of scientific publishing is to examine the end product, ie, the published works, using previously validated criteria. Williams and Borins<sup>1</sup> used this method and found significant gender bias in the studies published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. This study will be challenged on the basis of the criteria used to detect bias. Are they valid? Who is to decide? No generally agreed upon criteria exist to examine gender bias. Indeed, scientific journals have not indicated that they see a need for such examination. But even this method focuses on only a small part of the publication process. It would be of interest to also examine the process that results in the selection of what is published.

For peer-reviewed journals the process may vary, but usually the steps include: 1) a preliminary screening of submitted manuscripts for suitability, 2) a review for scientific validity and publishing priority (low, medium, or high) by two or three experts in the field, and 3) a decision by the editor whether to accept, reject, or request a rewrite and resubmission. The editor makes value judgments during each step; therefore, the potential for gender bias exists. But how are we to determine whether or to what extent it occurs? The simple answer is we cannot. The process is confidential and not open to such scrutiny. This is why the editor's role is so critical in maintaining standards of fairness, as well as of scientific integrity.

If the editor is interested in preventing gender bias, then some type of self-evaluation must be done to determine the editor's success. I have

not encountered a single report in the scientific literature in which the process of selecting papers for publication is examined for gender bias. Isn't it time? Shouldn't scientific journals be held accountable for preventing this type of bias? Isn't this an important scientific issue?

One reason for the existence of this journal (*JAMWA*) is the perception that other journals do not have the same interest or priorities for studies on women's health, for studies or editorials by women scientists and physicians, or even for their letters to the editor. This is difficult to prove, but the lack of representation of women as editors and editorial board members of scientific journals suggests that women do not have equal opportunity in this arena.

Why is this important? A scientific journal editor holds enormous power and can make or break a scientist on the basis of what is published and on the editorial "spin" that the work is given. Popular media interest in science and medicine is high and editors often highlight one or two studies in press releases. National media coverage gives the authors visibility and credibility. This endorses the scientific work as important and has the potential to enhance careers as well.

The American Association for the Advancement of Science, which publishes *Science*, should take leadership on this issue. In 1992 the editors of *Science* published an issue dedicated to women in science,<sup>2</sup> and apparently have decided to make this an annual event with a second publication in 1993.<sup>3</sup> Each of these issues deals with some of the important obstacles to recruitment, retainment, and success of women in various branches of science. The editor of *Science*, Daniel Koshland, stated "in simple fairness, the playing field must be leveled so that women are not inhibited by a less than helpful environment."<sup>4</sup> I certainly agree. Nowhere is this needed

more than in the scientific publication process. Consider the importance of scientific publications to the advancement of women scientists; it is critical to ensure that this playing field is leveled.

Mr. Koshland also maintained that "there is a willingness to change old procedures, and innovative experiments are waiting to be tried." I hope this is true! And *Science* can lead the way. Why not an examination of *Science* for gender bias. Each section from editorials, letters to editor, policy forum, news, perspectives, and published articles can be examined for gender bias. *Science* can develop its own scientifically sound criteria. No other group could undertake this mission, since access to the information is available only to insiders.

John Benditt, the editor of the special issues on women, has asked for suggestions for the next installment. Here is mine: *Science* examine yourself for female gender bias. Are you part of the problem? If not, convince us that you have looked at this problem scientifically by publishing the methodology and results of your self-examination. If evidence of bias exists, what will you do to correct it? You can demonstrate leadership on this issue and be part of the solution to overcoming barriers that face women in science. Pointing out problems for women in science is good, but not good enough. Show us that *Science* is doing more than publishing a yearly issue on women.

### References

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