

Updates to the Prehospital and Disaster Medicine Manuscript Review Process

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Abbreviations:

COI: conflict of interest
EIC: Editor-in-Chief
PDM: Prehospital and Disaster Medicine

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Abstract

The scientific manuscript review process can often seem daunting and mysterious to authors. Frequently, medical journals do not describe the peer-review process in detail, which can further lead to frustration for authors, peer reviewers, and readers. This editorial describes the updated manuscript review process for *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine*. It is hoped that this editorial will lead to increased clarity and transparency in the review process.

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Manuscript Review

To authors, the scientific manuscript review process can seem daunting and mysterious. It often appears as an endless series of random reviews, revisions, and approvals.

Unfortunately, many medical journals do not publish details of their review process, further adding to the mystery of the process.

Since July 1, 2024, *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine* (PDM) has been performing a quality improvement sequence to gradually refine the consistency and transparency of the manuscript review process. This editorial describes this process, which is being applied to all manuscripts submitted to PDM after January 1, 2025.

Overview of the Review Process

STEP 1: Administrative Review

The review process begins with a basic checklist performed by the PDM Editorial Office to verify nothing has been inadvertently omitted. The title page (with relevant information included per the updated 2025 guidelines¹), abstract, any tables or figures included with the submission, and the main document are all confirmed. The main document is briefly formatted to meet universal standards for ease of review – i.e., double-spaced, line numbers added for editor/reviewer reference. Every submission is analyzed by the plagiarism detector software iThenticate (Turnitin LLC; Oakland, California USA) to check for text duplication or plagiarism. An external title search is also completed to verify the manuscript has not been previously published. Any concerns discovered during this preliminary check are noted and passed along to the Editor-in-Chief (EIC).

STEP 2: Compliance with Mission Statement

The EIC or Handling Editor reviews the paper to ensure its compliance with the PDM Mission Statement.² Manuscripts should score high on the domains of innovative, high-impact, evidence-based, and scope (focused clearly on the topic of prehospital medicine or disaster medicine). Papers scoring poorly on one or more of these domains are usually rejected immediately.

STEP 3: Methods Review

This review is often performed at the same time as Step 2 above. The EIC or Handling Editor assesses the paper for compliance with key methodological issues such as appropriate ethics permissions, low plagiarism score, choice of the correct article category, appropriate format, proper reporting of means and confidence intervals, valid use of P values, inclusion of required reporting checklists, validity of the sampling method, and conclusions that do not reach beyond the findings of the study.³ Manuscripts with clear uncorrectable methodological flaws are rejected at this point. However, if the methodological issues are



correctable, or if further information is needed, the EIC or Handling Editor may return the manuscript to the authors (via the unsubmit action) for further revisions. Once the EIC or Handling Editor is satisfied that the paper meets PDM quality standards, it can move on to the next step.

STEP 4: Peer Review

Peer reviewers are chosen by the EIC or Handling Editor. This may be done in conjunction with electronic tools (such as Web of Science Reviewer Locator; Clarivate, London, UK), through PDM's reviewer team, in liaison with the Editorial Board, or by direct communication with known experts in the field. Peer reviewers assess the manuscript for alignment with the mission statement, clarity, and readability. They also review the key figures, tables, and numbers in the paper. Finally, reviewers give their own opinion on the disposition of the paper: accept, accept with revisions, revise and resubmit, or reject. *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine* requires a minimum of two peer reviews prior to publication. Of note, PDM requests that peer reviewers do not upload manuscripts into generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools.

STEP 5: Revision Cycle

After the first round of peer reviews are completed, the EIC or Handling Editor assesses the content of the reviews. Of note, while peer reviews are intended to help the editorial process, peer reviews are not binding – the EIC or Handling Editor decides based on his or her expert opinion the suitability of the article for PDM, which may agree or disagree with the peer reviewers. This may include rejection of the manuscript, acceptance (moving on to Step 6), or return to the authors for revisions. Manuscripts may be returned several times to the authors in the revise/resubmit cycle. Each revision is reviewed by the EIC or Handling Editor, who may enlist the help of the previous peer reviewers, additional peer reviewers, Editorial Board Members, or content/methodology experts. The revision cycle continues until the EIC or Handling Editor decides to reject the manuscript or move on to the next step.

STEP 6: Final EIC Review

The EIC reviews the final revision, and if necessary, requests further clarification, review, or revisions from the authors. The EIC then decides to either reject the manuscript or accept it for publication and move the paper to finalization for publication.

Finalization for Publication

For manuscripts accepted by the EIC for publication in PDM, a thorough finalization process is completed by the Managing Editor prior to submission to the publisher, Cambridge University Press, for production and publication. Finalization includes formatting, copy editing, and author approval.

Formatting

The final version of the manuscript must be formatted to meet both journal and typesetter requirements. Author information is added back into the blinded peer-review version, and all necessary declarations are included. Headings, subheadings, and references are all formatted to journal style. References are verified to be accurate and accessible. Citation order is confirmed and matched to the corresponding references. Tables and figures are also re-formatted, as necessary.

Copy Editing

All accepted manuscripts are copy edited by the Managing Editor for English language use and consistency. As a high-quality

international publication, PDM receives research submissions from authors around the globe. Many countries have differing styles in reporting research, and English is not always an author's first language. For consistency and comprehension, PDM adapts accepted manuscripts to meet structured journal standards. Use of first-person pronouns are removed, and grammar and spelling are modified to American English.

Author Approval

Once a manuscript is finalized by the Managing Editor, it is sent to the corresponding author for final approval. Here, authors verify the accuracy of the author information and declarations, as well as answer any questions the Managing Editor may have. If there are errors in citations/references, heavy use of first-person pronouns, or conflicting data reported in different areas of the manuscript, these are brought to the attention of the authors to correct. This is the final stage where authors can edit their manuscript prior to typesetting and publication – during proofing, corrections can be made of typographical errors only. Revision of the substance of the text is not permitted, unless previously discussed with the Managing Editor. After author approval is received, final files are sent to the publisher for production and publication. Cambridge University Press manages author publishing agreements that must be signed prior to manuscript publication.

Conflicts of Interest

Conflicts of interest (COI) may occur when editorial staff have a pre-existing personal, academic, or financial relationship with one or more of the authors. *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine* encourages editorial staff (and authors) to declare all COIs, even if they are not directly related to the manuscript.

Editors and peer reviewers are asked to decline involvement in the review process for any manuscript where they have a COI. If during the review process they discover they have a COI, they are asked to declare it immediately to the Managing Editor or the EIC who will replace the editor or peer reviewer with someone who has no COI.

Conflicts of interest involving the EIC require additional management steps. As all material published in PDM is ultimately the responsibility of the EIC, these manuscripts will go through Step 1 (initial review by the Managing Editor) and Step 2/Step 3 (review by the EIC or Handling Editor) as all manuscripts do. However, articles chosen in Step 2/Step 3 to go on to peer-review have additional steps (described below) added to their processing when the EIC has a conflict of interest. If accepted, they will be published with a note describing the COI and the review process.

If the EIC has a minor COI (such as previous personal, academic, or financial relationship with one of the authors), an additional review by a PDM Editorial Board Members is required after Step 6. The board member gives the final decision to accept or reject the manuscript.

If the EIC has a major COI (such as being an author on the manuscript, or having received financial compensation for the manuscript), the peer-review and revision cycle (Step 4 and Step 5) are conducted by a Handling Editor without any direct input from the EIC. The Handling Editor works with the Managing Editor to choose the peer reviewers and coordinate the revise-resubmit cycle. The Handling Editor decides to accept or reject the manuscript. Accepted manuscripts then proceed to Step 6 above.

Review of Commentaries and Guest Editorials

As of January 1, 2025, Commentaries and Guest Editorials require approval by the EIC and at least one Editorial Board Member for publication. They do not require external peer review.

Post-Publication Review

The scientific peer-review process is never truly complete. Post-publication review by the scientific community has historically been an important part of the evolution of scientific thought.

Prehospital and Disaster Medicine has always encouraged post-publication article commentaries from our readers. Commentaries allow readers to expand on the methods, findings, or interpretation of a manuscript previously published in PDM.

Occasionally, post-publication review reveals problems with the manuscript. This could include errors in the original data, problems with the sampling technique, miscalculations in the analysis, mistakes in the interpretation, or ethical transgressions. Such problems may occasionally require retractions of the article.

Importantly, while the PDM manuscript review process takes all reasonable efforts to curate high-quality research, the final responsibility for the academic integrity of the published manuscript rests with the authors.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this detailed description of the updated manuscript review process serves to clarify the review process for authors, peer reviewers, and readers.

This editorial serves as a promise of fairness and transparency to the authors. Several important issues can be noted. Firstly, manuscripts that do not meet the mission statement requirements of innovative, high-impact, evidence-based, and appropriate scope

will be rejected in Step 2 before methodological review even takes place. Authors are advised to consult the recent mission statement editorial to ensure that the manuscript is suitable for PDM.² The majority of manuscripts submitted (over 80%) are rejected early in the review process due to non-compliance with the mission statement. It should also be clear that the final decision to publish a paper rests with the EIC, and that manuscripts can be rejected by the EIC at any stage of the process – even after an accept decision has already been given. Authors should also note that Step 4 and Step 5 above are usually the most time-consuming, due to the overall shortage of qualified peer reviewers in the discipline. This can be particularly problematic for highly technical or specialist manuscripts.

For peer reviewers, this process is designed to streamline workflow through rigorous Editor and EIC review prior to peer-review being initiated. Peer reviewers can rest assured that when they receive the invitation to review for PDM, the manuscript complies with the mission statement, is formatted correctly, and has already been reviewed for methodology. Furthermore, as administrative review will take place at the final stages, peer reviewers do not need to rigorously edit spelling or grammar.

Finally, the above process provides reassurance to authors, peer reviewers, and readers that published PDM manuscripts have undergone a thorough quality review. It is hoped describing the process explicitly and transparently will streamline workflow for authors, peer reviewers, and editors.

Author Contribution

EJ and JMF contributed equally to the conception, writing, and final approval of the manuscript.

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