

Peer review: where science meets the arts of war, politics and ancient history

Quotes from MJA contributors in 2007

Peer review is a critical component of quality control in scientific medical journals. However, given the competitive nature of publishing, it is not surprising that the process of peer review has been described as a turf battle — the writers and originators of ideas aligned against the editors and critics — with the ultimate prize of the knowledge or doctrine being published.¹

Peer review of medical care was first documented in a book called *Ethics of the physician* by Ishaq bin Ali Al Rahawi (854–931 CE) of Al Raha, in northern Syria.² However, its presence in scientific medical publishing is more a part of modern than ancient history. Beginning in the mid 18th century and flourishing after World War II, particularly with the development of the photocopier in the 1950s,¹ journal peer review is now often Internet-based, as at the MJA.

The “Cyperspace Wars” are here. Participants on the “critics” side of the battle may receive briefings from recent articles like *Ten simple rules for reviewers*,³ freely available on the Internet. But, war is war in any time and place. This year, we share with you quotes from MJA reviewers who may well have studied a definitive work on military strategies and tactics: *The art of war*, a Chinese military treatise written during the sixth century BCE by Sun Tzu.⁴

Consider, in particular, this from the chapter on “laying plans”:

Attack him where he is unprepared, appear where you are not expected.

And this, from the chapter on “energy”:

The quality of decision is like the well-timed swoop of a falcon which enables it to strike and destroy its victim. Therefore the good fighter will be terrible in his onset, and prompt in his decision.

No part of the main IMRAD (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion) structure is impenetrable to such an attack.

Introduction: why did they do it?

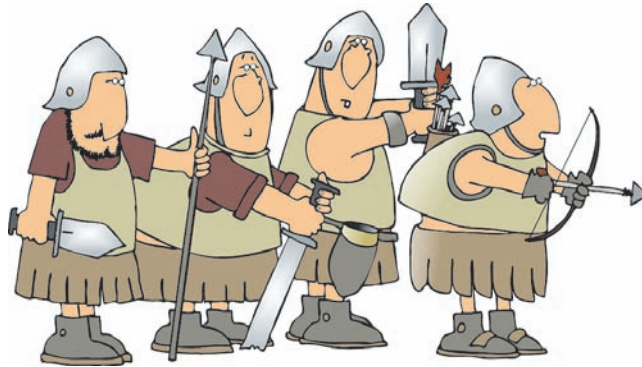
On analysing “aged” data:

It is a romantic notion to think that we’d uncover stunning new insight into the past, by rummaging through attics and basements filled with relics of a bygone age. We’re more likely to find dust bunnies and Nan’s collection of vaudeville programmes than to uncover Macfarlane Burnet’s long-lost personal diaries.

Methods: what did they do?

On study design:

The authors continually refer to their sample as a cohort. It is not. A cohort is a sample of people followed over time. The Romans established and maintained their empire by building roads, straight roads, enabling them to deploy their army in any corner of the empire. The basic unit of the Roman legion was the cohort and these



cohorts marched forward along these roads. In epidemiology, a cohort marches forward in time.

Results: what did they find?

On outcome measures:

“Mild toxicity” could be considered to be an etymological oxymoron. The word toxic comes from the Greek word meaning a bow (as in bow and arrow) and is inextricably linked with the word poison. This is, of course, because of the

early use of poisoned arrows by the Greeks. This idea endures in the phrase “a poisoned arrow”.

Discussion: what does it mean?

On possible researcher bias:

It looks as if there is a political agenda at work here and the complexity of the truth is hidden behind broad generalisations made through the obscuring power of the P value.

Implications: what happens next?

On style of writing:

The authors write as if they have discovered Third World poverty and a partial mechanism for its solution ... I recommend that the article be reworked so that it is more realistic, humble, and less enthusiastically gushing. The authors’ prediction is for future medical leaders, not spin doctors.

Of course, at the MJA, we prefer to see things as though innovators, authors, editors and reviewers are all on the same side — working together to advance science against disparate, unproven hypotheses.

As Sun Tzu put it:

We can form a single united body, while the enemy must split up into fractions. Hence there will be a whole pitted against separate parts of a whole, which means that we shall be many to the enemy’s few.

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