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Ninety-seven ignored: A personal reflection on the hidden struggles of an academic editor

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Once, my friend was frustrated with a journal that hadn't provided a decision on his article, even after months of waiting. He tracked down the editor on LinkedIn and expressed his displeasure. The editor calmly responded, suggesting that he should try taking up the role of an editor himself, adding that he was sure my friend wouldn't last long in the position. At the time, I thought the editor was simply defending delays. Now, having walked that path myself, I understand the weight behind those words.

In the early stages of an academic career, reviewing manuscripts is considered a reciprocal contribution to science.¹ Editing a journal, on the other hand, is often seen as a badge of honour, a mark of credibility and scholarly maturity. With this noble sentiment, I accepted invitations to serve on the editorial boards of two journals – one focused on medical education, and the other multidisciplinary. The journals were established (one indexed in PubMed Central, Scopus, and Web of Science with an impact factor of 3.2 and another indexed in Medline, Scopus, and Embase) and publish peer-reviewed articles with regular issues and international authorship. I felt pride, a sense of responsibility, and the thrill of getting a “highly rewarding experience.”² I started using their banner in my email signature!

But reality soon took over.

Over the course of handling around 20 articles, I found the task increasingly difficult. The true challenge was finding reviewers. On average, I needed to send requests to at least 30 reviewers to get two acceptances. For one article, I sent out over 100 reviewer invitations. None accepted. Not a single reviewer. For other manuscripts, those who did accept often delayed their responses by months.

And when I finally received a review, it was sometimes so brief that the technical team rejected it and insisted I find more reviewers. As an editor, I was not allowed to invite colleagues from my own institution due to conflict-of-interest policies. That further limited the pool.

Each article became a source of mental load. I carried their pending decisions in the back of my mind like unpaid bills. I'd check my inbox during dinner with family, or just before sleeping, hoping someone, somewhere, would say “Yes” to a review. I became quietly obsessed with moving things forward. All of this was done voluntarily. There was no compensation, no formal recognition, just pride!

I began to feel burned out. My work started interfering with my family life. I found myself irritable, distracted, and anxious about delays that I had little power to resolve. Eventually, I made a difficult decision: I resigned from both editorial boards.

This experience left me with many emotions—regret, relief, and a deepened respect for those who continue to serve in editorial roles. I also found solace in writing a few lines that captured what I had endured:

I sit beside the manuscript,
both of us waiting in quiet uncertainty.
Ninety-seven are ignored. Two declined.

One maybe. Most say nothing at all.

This is the quiet ritual of an editor,
performed daily,
offering science to reviewers.

Peers are too tired, too full, too over-asked.
Most simply delete, unseen, unheard!

I think editors are not only gatekeepers, but they are guides caught in the storm of the

academic environment, tasked with a job that demands more than what is humanly feasible. I share this not to discourage others from taking on editorial roles, but to ask for empathy. The next time a journal takes time to respond, remember: behind that delay may be a struggling editor, sending out yet another unanswered review request into the void.

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