**COMMENTS**

**Appraisal to journal editors about publication of scientific correspondence**

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**ABSTRACT**

Scientific correspondence, published as Letter to the Editor (LTE) helps us to further our knowledge about a published topic. Majority of the journals accept correspondence as LTE. In this article, we discussed 6 cases of LTEs which could be better treated by journal editors for betterment of scientific communication. Our appraisal to journal editors is to consider certain principles which would help to remove authors’ agony and a hindrance to critical comments on the published article which would enrich the science.

**Keywords:** letter to editor, letter to the editor, medical writing, peer review, publications

**Running title:** Ethical issues with letter to the editor

“Letter to the Editor (LTE)” or “Correspondence” acts as a bridge to cover the lacuna in a published manuscript. It also extends further insight into the published literature. LTEs are commonly written in response to a published article (1). However, case reports and general comments on the journal are also published as an LTE (2). Committee on Publication Ethics suggests the journals to allow post-publication discussion about a published article by LTEs (3). However, there are no uniform rules across different journals about the type of LTEs they accept. For biomedical journals, high impact articles (e.g., original article, review article, case report) get priority for publication. Auxiliary manuscript like LTEs may get unusual treatment (4). In this article, we have presented 6 cases which could be treated in a better way if journal editors could follow uniform ethical principles.

*Reply without letter*

A journal published a reply to the LTE without publishing the LTE. Immediately the journal editor was informed about the issue. The editor replied to inform that it occurred due to some technical error. In the next issue of the journal, the LTE was published with a message that the reply had already been published in the previous issue. It was a prompt, ethical and appropriate response from the journal editor. However, how can a reader understand the explanation without knowing the question?

*Reply published, letter rejected*

In this case, the reply to LTE was published in an issue. Thanks to the author that he did not forget to cite the LTE as an “InPress” article. However, the web link and PubMed link in the HTML version of the reply linked a wrong paper. The journal editor was informed about the issue. However, no communication was received even after several messages and emails. Eventually, the LTE was rejected. Isn’t it unethical to publish the title of the manuscript (with “InPress” citation) which would never be published?

*Pay money, publish the letter*

An LTE was sent in response to a published article which had a major reporting error. After waiting for a period of 9 months, an inquiry email was sent to the editor. The editor promptly replied that the manuscript had been provisionally accepted and it would be further processed after payment of the article-processing charge (APC). The editor was informed that as per the terms and conditions of the journal, LTE does not require any APC. Immediately the editor reverted that they had sent the LTE to the author but did not receive any reply. All future communication to the editor failed. Here the editor violated their own principle.

*Many letters from a single author*

A paper was published in a journal where the aim of the study was divided into 2 segments. However, the study was conducted to fulfill the first aim and the authors forgot to mention anything about the second aim. An LTE was written based on this principal theme along with some other points which needed attention. After a month and couples of days, the associate editor rejected the LTE on the ground of multiple LTE from a single set of authors. There was no mention that the issues raised do not require any attention. When would another vigilant reader raise her/his hand? Till then, error remains.

*Delayed publication*

A short communication with a major flaw was published in a journal in November 2016. An LTE was written in the same month and was uploaded. After waiting 554 days, the manuscript was accepted after a minor revision. The LTE got published 625 days after the publication of the article. PubMed has the facility to show comments on any article below the abstract. Hence, it is easy to find an LTE written in response to the article despite its time gap in publication. Hence, editors of the journal may think about this issue of allowing legitimate comments even after a long gap.

*Comment on old articles*

While searching for literature in PubMed, we found a paper which had technical and reporting errors. An LTE written on the issue got desk rejected as the article was 5 years old. In this case, the editor’s decision was not inappropriate as journals are not interested to publish comments on old articles. When the journals were published only in print version, it was really a problem for a reader to collect a journal which is 5 years old. Thanks to the internet, now we can access fresh and old article on the same browser. Hence, rejecting LTE only on the ground of time gap may be reconsidered by the journal editors. Maybe a vigilant reader or a vigilant peer did not notice the article previously.

With these experiences, we suggest a uniform guideline for LTE commenting on a published article in Table 1 which can be considered by the journal editors.

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| **Table 1:** Suggested publication guidelines for scientific correspondence in biomedical journals | |
| Action | Solution |
| LTE and reply to be published on the same issue | Eliminate readers’ confusion and authors’ agony |
| LTE may be published in electronic version only (with indexing) | Saves pages of printed journal |
| LTE to consider for publication on the scientific content, not on authors identity | Anyone can report deficiency |
| LTE on old articles to get full consideration in journals having electronic version | No lacuna is kept unreported |
| LTE correspondence to be free from APC | Eliminates monetary hindrance to comment |
| LTE: Letter to the Editor, APC: Article processing charge | |

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