

# Should Peer Review be confidential?

Martin Fenner, Gobbledygook

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Donald Kennedy, the editor-in-chief of *Science*, yesterday wrote an editorial about a legal dispute between the New England Journal of Medicine and the drug company Pfizer. Pfizer wants the NEJM to provide the reviewer comments on submitted papers about the two Pfizer products celecoxib (Celebrex) and valdecoxib (Bextra). Both drugs are used to treat pain and belong to the COX-2 inhibitor class of drugs. Rofecoxib (Vioxx) is another COX-2 inhibitor produced by Merck. Rofecoxib and valdecoxib, but not celecoxib were withdrawn from the market about three years ago because of an increased risk of cardiovascular side effects, including heart attacks.

Research findings about cardiovascular side effects of COX-2 inhibitors are at the center of the dispute and Pfizer is now seeking arguments for their case not just from published papers but also in confidential peer reviews and manuscripts that were rejected. This legal dispute is important because it touches central aspects of the peer review process.

The findings of scientific papers can have consequences not only to the scientific community involved, but also for the personal fortunes of their authors (e.g. new jobs or grants), the treatment of patients, our policies towards climate change – or the profit of a drug company. With that much at stake, the temptation to move the scientific argument from the editorial office to the courtroom is there. We should resist this temptation, or the peer review process and the way we communicate science will never be the same again.