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# Challenges in peer review in Nepali medical journals

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## ABSTRACT

Peer review remains the cornerstone of quality assurance in scientific publishing, yet its effective implementation faces unique obstacles in resource-limited settings. In Nepal, rapid growth in medical research output, coupled with a small pool of experienced reviewers and rising submission volumes, has strained the peer-review system of local journals. Key challenges include a limited number of qualified reviewers, widespread lack of formal reviewer training, reliance on manual editorial processes, academic promotion pressure, and frequent institutional conflicts. These factors contribute to prolonged review times, high reviewer refusal rates, and occasional compromises in rigour. Strengthening peer review in Nepal requires a coordinated national effort: standardized and transparent processes, structured reviewer training and mentorship programmes, wider adoption of online journal systems, public recognition or continuing medical education credits for reviewers, and cultivation of peer review as an integral component of scientific citizenship. Addressing these bottlenecks is essential to enhance the credibility, efficiency, and global visibility of Nepalese medical journals.

**Keywords:** Conflicts of interest, editorial process, medical journals, peer review, reviewer training, scientific publishing.

## INTRODUCTION

The editorial process of scientific journals is complex but essential for the dissemination of scientific knowledge. The quality of published articles depends on the expertise of authors, editors, and reviewers. In Nepal, where medical research output is rapidly increasing yet resources remain limited, one of the most significant bottlenecks lies in the effective implementation of peer review.<sup>1,2</sup> Editors bear the primary responsibility for coordinating the entire editorial workflow and for selecting suitable reviewers—a task that has become increasingly difficult in the Nepali context due to the small pool of experienced reviewers and rising submission numbers. This editorial aims to outline the major challenges observed in Nepali medical journals and proposes practical measures to strengthen the peer-review system.

## What is peer review?

Peer review is the critical evaluation of manuscripts by qualified experts who are not part of the editorial staff. It serves as the foundation of scientific publishing, ensuring that published research is credible, ethical, and scientifically sound.<sup>3</sup> Despite criticisms of being slow or subjective, peer review remains the most widely accepted process for validating research prior to publication.<sup>4</sup> In resource-constrained settings such as Nepal, where the academic community is small and submission volumes are rising rapidly, these inherent limitations are greatly magnified.<sup>1,5</sup> Strengthening the process is therefore not just desirable but essential for maintaining and elevating the

credibility of Nepali medical journals.

### Challenges in peer review in Nepal

In the Nepali medical publishing sector, peer review has special significance in a rapidly expanding research environment and growing academic pressures. Despite progress, several challenges undermine its effectiveness and credibility. A limited pool of qualified reviewers, particularly in highly specialized clinical and biomedical fields, is one of the key challenges. Nepal has only about 1,800–2,000 active health-science researchers with an h-index  $\geq 1$ , spread across more than 70 medical and health-related journals indexed in NepJOL.<sup>6,7</sup> This scarcity leads to reviewer overburden, high refusal rates, fatigue, delays, and occasionally superficial reviews. For example, the Journal of Nepal Medical Association (JNMA) reported that an average of 7.8 reviewers had to be contacted per manuscript in 2024, with a median time to first decision of 124 days.<sup>7</sup>

Many reviewers have received little or no formal training in scientific peer review. An informal 2023–2024 survey of reviewers for major Nepalese journals showed that approximately 68% had never attended structured peer-review training or workshop.<sup>8</sup> Although almost 40% of NepJOL-hosted journals now use Open Journal Systems (OJS), many still rely on manual email-based systems, contributing to inefficiencies and lack of transparency.<sup>7</sup>

Academic promotion requirements exert significant pressure. Nepal Medical Council guidelines mandate at least two first-author publications in indexed journals for promotion to Associate Professor, while Tribhuvan University and Kathmandu University require three for full Professorship. This is driving a 38% annual increase in submissions to Nepali indexed journals between 2020 and 2024, sometimes creating implied pressure to accept borderline manuscripts.<sup>7</sup> In Nepal's small and closely connected academic community, institutional overlaps are common. A 2022–2023 analysis of five NepJOL medical journals revealed that 24–31% of assigned reviewers shared the same institution as at least one author, and institutional affiliation was not always declared.<sup>9</sup>

### Strengthening peer review in Nepal

Prepublication peer review is a cornerstone of science. Strengthening peer review is not merely an editorial responsibility; it requires a collaborative effort between authors, reviewers, institutions, and policymakers.<sup>10</sup> The peer-review process must be a national priority, and there is a need to build a robust peer-review culture.

Standardizing procedures, increasing transparency, and providing training for reviewers can improve peer review.<sup>4</sup>

Reviewers must be selected carefully; acknowledging them publicly and offering nonmonetary rewards appear to be good strategies for engaging reviewers. Journals need to recognize highly productive reviewers or introduce volunteer reviewers (volunpeers) to prevent a peer-review crisis.<sup>11,12</sup> Some other recommended measures could include professionalizing peer review, which refers to improving knowledge and training to engage in peer reviewing and some form of reward or compensation for the work.<sup>2,13</sup> A commitment to science and the scientific community should be the main motivation for peer reviewing. Above all, reviewing should be seen as an essential part of scientific citizenship for contributing to the community that enables one's own research to be published.<sup>14</sup>

### CONCLUSIONS

Ensuring rigorous peer review is fundamental for enhancing Nepal's global research reputation. A coordinated national approach—incorporating standardized procedures, reviewer training, better technology and institutional support—will be vital to building a stronger, more trustworthy publication ecosystem. A collaborative support from regulatory bodies such as NHRC, universities, and professional councils will be crucial to sustain improvements.

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