

## Editorial challenges of the *Revista de Saúde Pública*

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**Abstract** *The editors of the Revista de Saúde Pública describe the journal's editorial profile and discuss the challenges of scientific publication in the area. A historical overview of almost 50 years of the journal is reported, with the temporal projection of their bibliometric indicators. Qualitative and quantitative parameters of its editorial profile and indexes are also reported. Budget constraints and the actions being taken to address them are discussed. The difficulty in allocating reviewers for manuscripts submitted to the editorial process is also discussed; an issue that affects scientific publication in many areas of knowledge. In particular, we sought to reflect on the proposal of measures to boost the editorial process by alleviating the shortage of reviewers and their possible harmful consequences for the editorial process.*

**Key words** *Serial publications, Scientific publication indicators, Bibliometrics, Peer review, Research*

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## Introduction

*Revista de Saúde Pública - RSP* [Journal of Public Health] aims to contribute to the development of scientific knowledge, through the disclosure of original research results, studies of literature review, comments and technical notes on the various subject areas and interdisciplinary fields encompassed in public health. To better serve this purpose, its editorial team strives to maintain the high recognition that the journal has captivated in its many decades.

The *RSP* invites the submission of papers in all thematic areas of interest for public health, and seeks to provide the best of our editorial efforts for authors and readers. All manuscripts submitted to the *RSP* undergo a careful process of evaluation, in order to select the best contributions and enhance the manuscripts through the exchange and joint reflection among peers. When submitted in Portuguese or Spanish, the articles approved for disclosure are translated into English and published in both languages. The articles published go through technical reading and orthographic and grammatical review, and are indexed in the main bibliographic database. We congratulate *Ciência & Saúde Coletiva* [Science & Public Health] for their twenties and we welcome the initiative to organize an overview of the publishing field area in the country. In this article, we present the *RSP*, revising its nearly fifty years of history and discussing editorial issues that define the scientific communication field in public health nowadays.

## Historical overview

The *Revista de Saúde Pública* was established in 1967 as a substitute for the journal *Arquivos da Faculdade de Higiene e Saúde Pública da Universidade de São Paulo* [Archives from the School of Hygiene and Public Health of the University of São Paulo], which was held from 1947 to 1966. Originated from the leadership of the School of Public Health in the health movement at different historical junctures, this publication series began in 1919, shortly after the founding of the (then named) Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, and was entitled *Boletins do Instituto de Higiene* [Bulletin of Hygiene Institute]. Despite the huge formal, functional and organizational changes that occurred in the transition of the three historical settings of the journal, the production of specialized knowledge, scientific com-

munication and the training of human resources in public health have always been the aim of its proponents.

The studies for the creation of the *Revista de Saúde Pública* and the planning of its initial operation were directed by Elza Salvatori Berquó, who was in charge of the Committee of Publications, also composed by Armando Piovesan, Flávio Wagner Rodrigues, Oswaldo Paulo Forattini, Paulo S. Nogami and Reinaldo Ramos, in addition to Odair Pacheco Pedroso, who was appointed the first Director of the *RSP*.

It is worth noting that the creation of the *Revista de Saúde Pública* in 1967, replacing the *Arquivos da Faculdade...* was justified by the prospect of expanding and updating the scientific communication features in the public health area<sup>1</sup>. In particular, its proponents intended to offer the professional field a vehicle for disseminating the results of research, which would not be restricted to the School itself, a condition that had not been attended by the former publication of the *Arquivos da Faculdade...* They wanted to overcome the “parochialism” indicated by the name *Arquivos da Faculdade...* Indeed, the previous publication was restricted to the dissemination of studies conducted in the School.

When assessing this target twenty years after its proposition, Oswaldo Paulo Forattini<sup>2</sup>, the then president of the Publications Committee, considered that it had been fully achieved, due to the large number of published articles (from 194 articles for twenty years of *Arquivos da Faculdade...* to 846 in the first twenty years of the *Revista de Saúde Pública*); the change in its frequency (from six-monthly since its creation to quarterly in 1972, and every two months in 1981); and the achievement of the main national and international indexations. Granting from the CNPq and Fapesp, since 1979, and by the Program of Support to Scientific Journals Published at the University of São Paulo, as of 1985, contributed substantially for these purposes.

Another important ingredient for the *RSP* editorial success in its early years was the adoption of peer review for the selection of manuscripts. Although the literature have been discussing flaws in the “referee” system, this procedure was recognized by the Committee of Publications as the most appropriate; and its implementation since the creation of the journal was acknowledged as having contributed for the “qualitative evaluation of papers submitted for publication”<sup>2</sup>. In the mid-1980s, the *Revista de Saúde Pública* had 227 experts registered as reviewers to issue

opinions on the submitted articles, and a rejection rate of 40.9% of the manuscripts<sup>3</sup>.

The theme of the language for publication was discussed in the *Revista de Saúde Pública* since the 1980s; both to emphasize the importance of the publication in English as a strategy for internationalization and to highlight the need to maintain communication in Portuguese<sup>3</sup>. Of the papers published in 1984-7, 4.1% had a foreign co-authors; this number was interpreted as an indicator that the Journal, albeit timidly, was already starting to attract international interest.

When the journal completed 30 years in the following decade, editors proposed the adoption of Spanish and regional integration of the Southern Cone as new strategies for internationalization<sup>4</sup>. Luiz Jacintho da Silva advocated that a journal should, at the same time, be driven by the social process and the driver of such process; witness a time and act on it. He foresaw that the constitution of the Mercosur would involve the integration of sanitary standards and regulations between countries, as happened with trade. This integration, however, would require the integration of health programs, which could only occur after intense reflection and debate of the Latin American community.

From this perspective, the author reviewed the *Revista de Saúde Pública* history through the health processes that it had followed and discussed in its first three decades. The Journal would have been chronicler of the evolution of traditional public health agenda; until the mid-1990s, its articles had accompanied:

*the reintroduction of Aedes aegypti, the growth of morbidity and mortality from occupational diseases, the growing participation of non-communicable diseases and violence in morbidity [...] the reduction of maternal and infant mortality and the growth of the practice of breastfeeding*<sup>4</sup>.

In 1997, another important milestone in the Journal history is represented by its admission to the *Scielo* collection. The disclosure on the Internet of its manuscripts was an important step forward in the relevance of the *Revista de Saúde Pública*, providing a more dynamic interaction with the academic circle and professionals working in health services. The *RSP*'s admission to *Scielo* was accompanied by editorial changes, such as the reduction of size for manuscripts and the full adoption of the Vancouver style. These changes also had the purpose to increase the dynamism of publication<sup>5</sup>.

In the mid-2000s, after completing his 40 years, the *Revista de Saúde Pública* was again

evaluated, and its publishing success once again was highlighted in terms of recognition and impact. During this period, the *RSP* was the only journal in the public health area already indexed in the *Web of Science* and accounted for an exponential growth in the number of citations of their articles<sup>6</sup>; it had received the grade of "International A" in the first evaluation system of scientific journals performed by CAPES, and was the fourth best journal quantified in the impact factor assessed by *Scielo*<sup>7</sup>, among all journals included in the collection. Also, possibly driven by the online publication of the English version of its articles since 2003, the rate of manuscripts with authors from abroad increased to 17.6% in the period 2002-2006<sup>6</sup>.

It is also relevant to note that the modification of the thematic agenda of articles published in the *Revista de Saúde Pública*, somehow, continued to follow changes in the agenda of priorities in public health. The theme of "infectious diseases and epidemiological surveillance", which corresponded to 61.7% of articles published from 1967 to 1973, came to 30.1% from 2002 to 2006. On the other hand, emergent themes in public health, which hardly appeared in the first period, started to occupy 25.7% of the articles published in the second period: occupational health, mental health, nutrition and oral health. The themes of "health promotion, health policy and management" (ranging from 19.4% to 18.0% of the articles between the two periods); "health and environment" (from 6.5% to 6.0%) and "social sciences in health" (from 6.5% to 5.3%) kept practically constant the percentage share<sup>6</sup>.

The analysis of access statistics of the *Scielo* collection provided new possibilities for assessing the impact of *Revista de Saúde Pública*. From 1996 to 2003, the *RSP* was the journal of the area with the highest number of visits, both per issue and per articles published<sup>8</sup>. Epidemiology, occupational health, nutrition and health policy were the most prevalent thematic areas of the most read articles. "Prevalence Survey" was the type of study which was more accessed by users of the *Scielo* system; manuscripts using quantitative analysis techniques received more than three times the number of accesses of the qualitative studies<sup>8</sup>. At the time of its fortieth anniversary, *RSP* launched a thematic issue<sup>9</sup> on the scientific production and communication in public health, in which prominent names in the professional field evaluated the profile of articles published in different themes and subject areas of public health and other topics such as ethics in scientific

communication and editorial and bibliometric aspects of interest.

Chart 1 summarizes the historical and institutional milestones of the *RSP* in its nearly fifty years of history; almost a hundred, if we add the time of their predecessors. The most recent institutional milestones are the admission of the journal, in 2014, to the PMC (*PubMed Central*, the repository of scientific papers maintained by the US National Library of Medicine) and the adoption in 2015 of the system “rolling pass”, which allows the online publication of articles on their approval, without having to wait for the organization of fascicles. We are scheduling editorial activities to celebrate, in 2016, the fiftieth anniversary of the *Revista de Saúde Pública*; suggestions are welcome!

### Editorial Profile

The *RSP* is run by three Editors-in-Chief, one Executive Editor and sixteen Associate Editors. Peer

review involves more than two thousand experts from Brazil and abroad, registered as reviewers in the online submission system of the Journal. This is a very important ingredient for the success of scientific communication. The quality of the editorial assessment of manuscripts ensures the choice of the best contributions and their improvement during the evaluation process. The quality of editorial evaluation is also an important factor for the decision of researchers, when they choose the journal to which they will submit their contributions. And this whole process is based on the unpaid work of Editors and *ad hoc* reviewers.

The *Revista de Saúde Pública* is classified as A2 in the public health area, according to the current system of CAPES for the classification of scientific journals, which means that it is part of the group of periodicals presenting bibliometric indicators (impact factor, h index and citations per document) corresponding to the 10% best placed among the indexed journals in the field worldwide. The articles published in the *RSP*

**Chart 1.** Historical and institutional milestones of the *Revista de Saúde Pública*.

Year	Historical and institutional milestones
1919	Launching of the <i>Boletim do Instituto de Higiene</i> (Bulletin of the Institute of Hygiene), first institutional configuration of a vehicle for scientific communication in the School of Public Health.
1947	Launching of <i>Arquivos da Faculdade de Higiene e Saúde Pública</i> (Archives of the School of Hygiene and Public Health), substituting the Bulletin, and anticipating the <i>Revista de Saúde Pública</i> .
1967	Launching of the <i>Revista de Saúde Pública</i> , in substitution to the previous publication, and already adopting contemporary editorial criteria such as peer review and thematic and disciplinary breadth, and no restrictions according to the institutional origin of the manuscripts.
1972	The <i>Revista de Saúde Pública</i> starts to be published quarterly.
1981	The <i>Revista de Saúde Pública</i> starts to be bimestrial.
1998	The <i>Revista de Saúde Pública</i> joins the Scielo collection.
2003	The <i>Revista de Saúde Pública</i> begins to publish the English version of its articles.
2009	The <i>Revista de Saúde Pública</i> exceeds for the first time, the impact factor equal to one in the Web of Science.
2014	The <i>Revista de Saúde Pública</i> joins the PMC collection ( <i>PubMed Central</i> ), the public repository of publications maintained by the US National Library of Medicine (National Institutes of Health).
2015	The <i>Revista de Saúde Pública</i> adopts the “rolling pass” system; that is, the articles are published sequentially, without division of annual volumes into fascicles.

are indexed in the main bibliographic databases: *Web of Science*, *EMBASE*, *Lilacs*, *Scopus*, *PubMed*, *PubMed Central*, among others.

Figure 1 synthesizes information on the bibliometric evaluation of the journal, and shows the time series of the impact factor in the *Web of Science* (1997-2013), and the number of citations per document (1999-2013) in the *Scopus* database, similar measure to the impact factor. Throughout the period, measurements obtained by *Scopus* are systematically higher due to the greater extent of their indexing database. The raising of the impact factor in the 2006-2008 period corresponds to the admission to *Web of Science* of several journals held in Brazil, which communicate with the *RSP*. The proportion of self-citation, namely citations from other papers published by the *RSP*, has remained at acceptable values during this period, between 8% and 12%, so that the exclusion of self-citations would affect little the values of the measures shown in Figure 1.

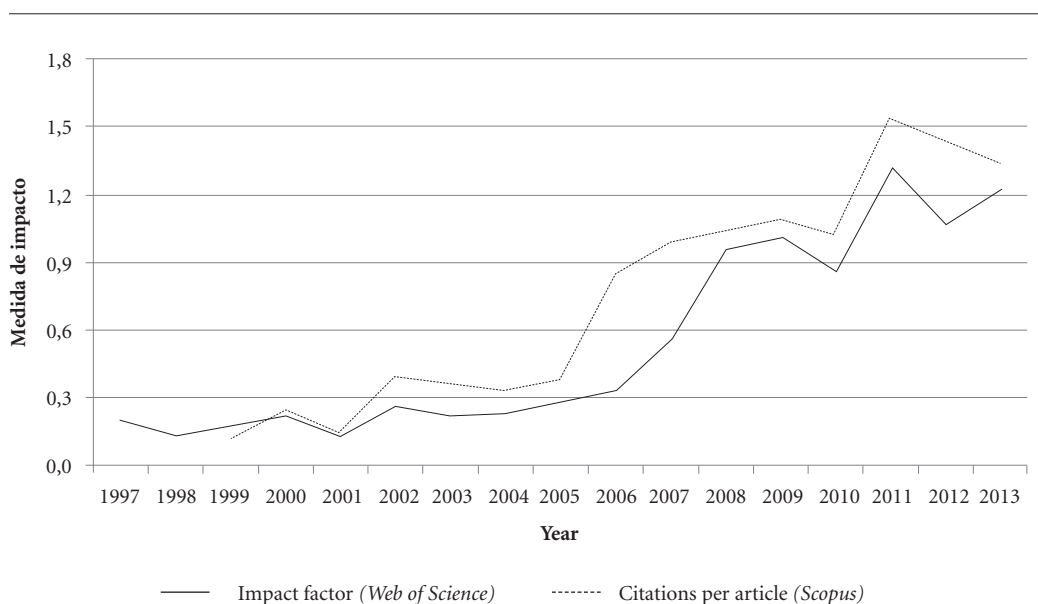
Figure 2 shows the percentage distribution of citations in *Web of Science* to the articles published in the *Revista de Saúde Pública* from 1997 to 2012, according to national or foreign origin of journals whose articles cited the *RSP*. Almost half of these citations came from foreign jour-

nals, which can be interpreted as a sign of internationalization of the professional environment that includes the *Revista de Saúde Pública*.

Figure 3 shows the journals mostly related to the *RSP* in 2013, in terms of citations. The visual information is discrete; it solely refers to 2013, and only journals indexed in the *Web of Science* appear in the statistics. Both from the point of view of the journals that most cite the *RSP* and of journals that are most cited by the *RSP*, the figure highlights the strong relationship of the *RSP* with its sister journals *Cadernos de Saúde Pública* and *Ciência & Saúde Coletiva*.

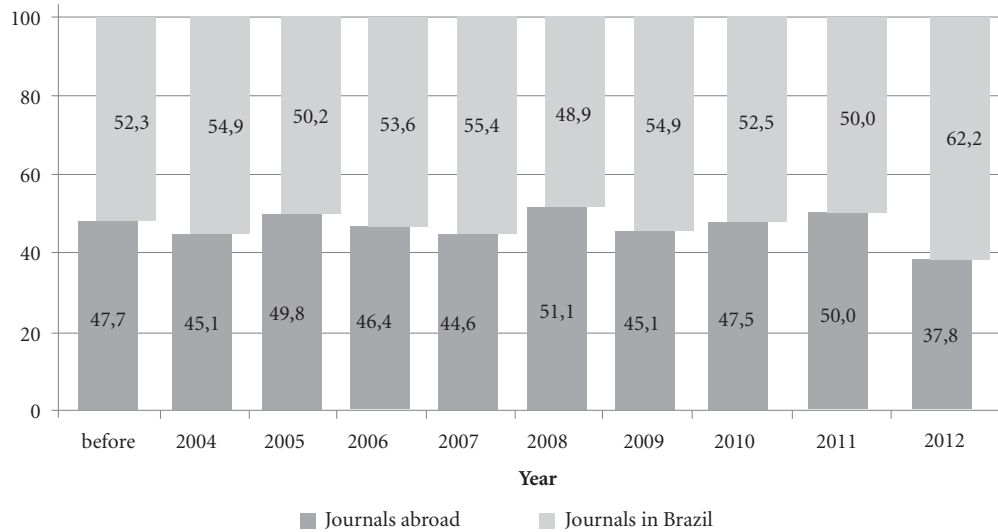
Figure 4 shows the proportion of articles that received at least one citation in the Scientific Journal Ranking from *Scopus* database, considering periods of three years, from 1996 to 2012. There is a noteworthy increase of articles that received at least one citation: from 15.6% in 1996-1998 to 57.4% in the triennium 2010-2012, and 62.6% in 2008-2010 and 2009-2011. These data demonstrate once again the relevance and the increased visibility of articles published in the *RSP*.

Figure 4 also shows the gradual increase in the number of articles produced in cooperation among authors based in Brazil and abroad. This proportion increased from 5.7% in 1999 to



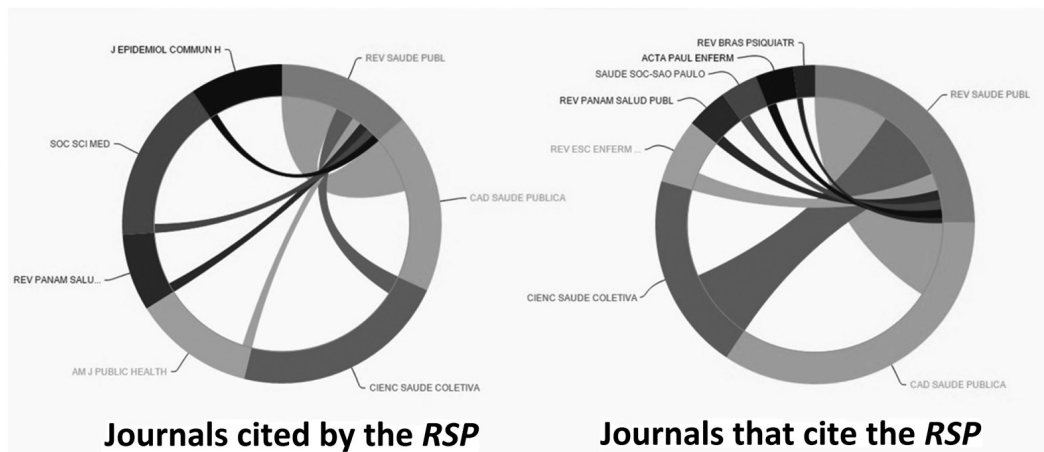
**Figure 1.** Time series of the impact factor (*Web of Science*) and the number of citations per article (*Scopus*) of the *Revista de Saúde Pública*.

Source: Journal Citation Reports (*Web of Science*) and Scientific Journal Rank - SCImago (*Scopus*).



**Figure 2.** Percentage distribution of citations in the *Web of Science* to the articles published in the *Revista de Saúde Pública* from 1997 to 2012, second national or foreign origin of the journals.

Source: *Journal Citation Reports*.

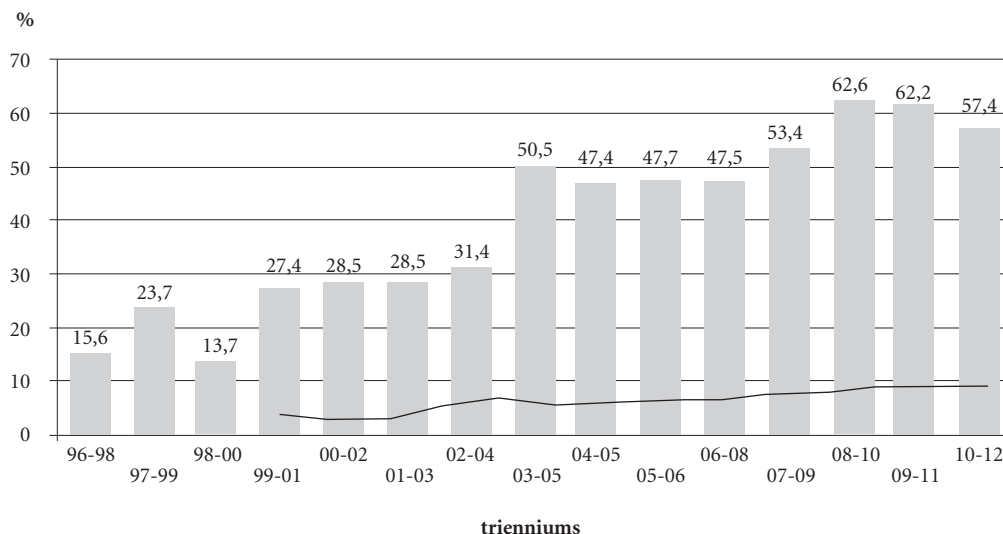


**Figure 3.** Journals more related to the *Revista de Saúde Pública*, according to citations made and received by the RSP in the *Web of Science* in 2013. Source: *Journal Citation Reports*.

Source: *Journal Citation Reports*.

10.8% in 2013. In Figure 4, this measure was presented as an average for trienniums (line). This ratio also indicates the progressive internationalization of the professional field that discloses their works in the *RSP*. Even so, the magnitude

of this series can be considered low when compared to journals published in the US or Europe. This difference indicates that the international exchange of researchers is yet relatively small; but this difference also reflects factors such as the



**Figure 4.** Proportion of articles in the *Revista de Saúde Pública* with at least one citation in the Scopus database (blocks in blue) and proportion of articles with cooperation among authors based in Brazil and abroad (black line).

Source: *Scientific Journal Rank - SCImago (Scopus)*.

preference for publishing in the country when the studies only included Brazilian researchers or when subjects of local or national interest were surveyed.

### Budgetary difficulties

Without considering supplements (twelve in the last ten years, from 2005 to 2014), the *Revista de Saúde Pública* publishes about 120 articles per year, on average, 20 articles per issue, six issues per year. In the early 2010s, the *RSP* received an average of twenty articles per week, over a thousand articles submitted per year, the rejection rate was 87%. The *RSP* editorial processing consumed about 65% of their budget on production costs (editing and publishing, printing, English version and online publication) and 35% in human resources (for management and operation of the online submission system, coordination and implementation of the technical review and proof sheets; outsourced services).

It is important to note that the accounting of the costs of the *RSP* did not include the unpaid work of publishers and *ad hoc* reviewers. Nor does it include costs borne directly by the School

of Public Health, such as the shipment by mail of printed copies and the free distribution of the *RSP* for health agencies and university libraries; the remuneration of support staff hired directly by the School; infrastructure and computer and office supplies; in addition to the maintenance of a large office in a prime area of São Paulo.

Even so, the costs of production and human resources of the *RSP* accounted for 82% of its budget allocation, which has been derived from the Program to Support Scientific Periodical Publications of University of São Paulo, the Ministry of Health and the State Health Department of the São Paulo, the agencies CAPES, CNPq and FAPESP. This mismatch was being faced with palliative and temporary measures in an effort not to harm the quality standard of editorial papers. The *RSP* has adopted measures in order to restrict and postpone expenses, such as reducing the editorial support staff, with the layoff of functionaries. In 2012, the printed edition was reduced in 80%; in 2014, this reduction reached 100%, because the *RSP* started to circulate only through the Internet. Carrying out *press releases* on published articles and their disclosure to press organizations and social networks was temporarily withheld. In addition, we had to face some

delay in publication of the fascicles, in order to try to match the inflow of funds with making the payments.

To face the difficulties, we began in 2012 to charge authors a fee for manuscripts approved for publication. The value of this rate (R\$1,500.00, unchanged in the following three years) subsidizes only part of the costs involved in the publication of the articles. Even so, it represents a valuable source of funds for maintaining the quality of editorial services traditionally offered by the *RSP*.

Summoning up the authors to integrate further the efforts to enable scientific communication has been a measure increasingly used in Brazil and abroad. The articles published in the *RSP* have, on average, three authors. Many of these authors have the responsibility to raise institutional resources for conducting research and also for the dissemination of their work. In addition, the authors with difficulties may consider applying for an exemption or reduction of this rate.

### Peer review

In the field of public health, the publication of scientific papers in indexed journals is one of the most important resources to communicate the knowledge obtained through research. The publication in scientific journals requires the selection of the best papers for publication, review by competent and specialized professionals, and the issue of suggestions for improvement and possible correction of the originals. For these purposes, the scientific publication strongly relies on peer review, the same system used in the granting of funds for research and for admission and promotion in academic careers.

Peer evaluation is a collaborative process among researchers, who strive to evaluate, mutually and without bias, their own work. The promotion of the professional environment, both in Brazil and internationally, has generated an increasing scientific production, bringing an enormous challenge to the peer review process. The journals can ask two, three or even more opinions by published article. Not all written articles get to be published, and not all published articles are accepted by the first journal for which they were submitted.

Many journals have struggled to convince their peers to invest some of your time to review manuscripts<sup>10,11</sup>. Researchers receive an increas-

ing demand to review the articles written by his colleagues; many refuse due to overwork. The situation tends to be paradoxical; researchers continue submitting more and more articles as authors, but they are too busy and spend less and less time to read the article of others. The most experienced professionals tend to be the busiest, and are replaced by young researchers in the review work.

More fortunate, the editors of a journal denied having a shortage crisis in the provision of reviewers<sup>12</sup>. Still, the difficulty in obtaining high quality peer review is in the hearts and minds of academic journal editors in different branches of knowledge<sup>13,14</sup>.

Submitting articles without doing proportionate reviewing was said to be a form of cheating<sup>15</sup>. This situation was depicted as a “tragedy of the reviewer commons”<sup>16</sup>; we are all bound to collective ruin when each individual egoistically seeks his/her own interest without taking proper care of the common ground. However, the appeal to moral arguments is ineffective and only contributes to one-off and limited solutions. More in line with “carrot” than “stick” solutions, several measures have been proposed to attribute credit to the work effectively done. A few journals reward reviewers with a small fee, a discount for future submissions, access to online services, a diploma expressing hearty gratitude.

Many journals already publish the name of reviewers who contributed during the precedent year. However, this publication does not report on the quantity and quality of reviews performed. The allocation of CME (Continuing Medical Education) credits for reviews effectively done and bibliometric resources to account for the revision work have also been proposed<sup>15,16</sup>. Innovative initiatives have been adopted in order to give greater professional recognition to the work of reviewers. The *BMJ* and its affiliated publications such as the *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*, innovated by disclosing the name of the reviewers to the authors. More recent serial publications, which have started to circulate exclusively online, such as *PLoS One* and *BMC*, have also adopted the measure, in addition to provide public access to the opinions issued for each published article, as well as the subsequent editorial debate, the responses of the authors and the modifications performed. *Nature* has implemented experimentally an *open peer-review* system, in which submissions were available for a certain period of time to whoever wanted to



review, even without being individually invited. *The Lancet* held a seminar evaluation, in which the authors and reviewers discussed personally the manuscripts submitted for the supplement “Saúde do Brasil” (Health in Brazil)<sup>17</sup>.

The *Revista de Saúde Pública* is little inclined to organizational innovations and trials; these new forms of peer review must be consolidated

before being adopted by the *RSP*. Even though, we feel obliged to bring this matter for consideration of the academic circle and professional field of research in public health. The difficulty in obtaining peer review has been an important factor for the delay in the evaluation process and publication of the originals; we fear that this problem may worsen in the short and medium term.

### **Collaborations**

JLF Antunes, I França Júnior, MTD Andrade, RCB Barata and CA Monteiro participated equally in all stages of preparation of the article.

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