

Preface

Editors are frequently called the 'gatekeepers' of their journals. They are most certainly this, determining what their journals will publish and what they won't. But their role goes beyond this. They also act as 'midwives', bringing to fruition the labours of researchers – highlighting experimental inadequacies, pointing out misinterpretations of results and offering alternative explanations, improving the presentation of manuscripts, and advising on alternative and perhaps more appropriate venues for the publication of their work. Editors are also the guardians of the scholarly record, with a duty to ensure that this is kept free from corrupting influences and that errors – both genuine and those resulting from fraudulent work or unethical behaviour – are corrected appropriately and as quickly as possible. Editors are given great power when they are appointed, and with this comes enormous responsibility. Suddenly they are entrusted with the work of other researchers, perhaps even that of their competitors, and their decisions determine whether or not that work is published. Because success in job and grant applications, career advancement and public recognition depend to a large degree on publication records, they are therefore indirectly responsible for these.

At the heart of all these roles lies the peer-review process, nowadays oft-maligned, but at its best a very powerful and sophisticated tool. Yet in the great majority of cases, editors come to the job without any specific knowledge about or training in peer review, the decision-making process, or the potential problems and pitfalls. For many it has been difficult to know where to find advice and guidance. My aim in writing this book has been to provide a manual to help editors and their editorial colleagues and staff – both those new to their roles and those who have been in post some time but may be struggling or unhappy with their procedures. I wanted first and foremost to provide practical guidance on all aspects of peer review and create an awareness of the issues involved and the potential problems.

Editors and editorial staff are amongst the most committed and enthusiastic of individuals, frequently becoming passionate about their journals. I have been fortunate in my years with *The Plant Journal* to experience this at first hand, and my sincere thanks go to all the editors and editorial office staff with whom I have had the privilege of working over the past 16 years. My thanks go also to those individuals who provided me with invaluable feedback and constructive comments during the writing of this book – Sally Morris from ALPSP, Bob Campbell and Edward Wates from Blackwell Publishing, Alex Williamson from the *BMJ* Publishing Group, and three anonymous reviewers. The last were clearly people with great experience of journal editorial work and so their positive reactions and comments were a source of

great encouragement and help. But the final responsibility for the content lies with me and I hope that even if there are things with which some readers may disagree, it will make them think about the problems and perhaps reassess their own procedures. The book is not intended to be prescriptive but rather a source of guidance and help. All journals (and the communities they serve) are different, and their editors are the people who are best placed to decide what is most appropriate for them. The book has been four years in the writing and my thanks go to Erica Schwarz for so ably steering it through the production process to become a reality.

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