

An occasional column, in which Caveman and other troglodytes involved in cell science emerge to share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Messages for Caveman and other contributors can be left at [caveman@biologists.com](mailto:caveman@biologists.com). Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.

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## In (anonymous) support of anonymity

There is a recurring discussion in the scientific community about the good and bad characteristics of the anonymity of reviewers and, conversely, the identity of authors of papers and grant applications. Of course, one's perspective is different, depending upon whether you are an author or reviewer. It goes something like this.

### Anonymity of reviewers

*Good characteristic (for reviewers):* allows reviewers to feel free to critique a paper or grant application without worrying about direct retribution from irate authors whose paper or grant application is rejected on the basis of their recommendations.

*Bad characteristic (for authors):* reviewers are free to critique a paper or grant application without worrying about direct retribution from irate

authors whose paper or grant application is rejected on the basis of their recommendations.

*Bad characteristic (for reviewers):* stops authors from knowing which reviewer has been most supportive in getting their paper or grant application accepted (you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours?).

*Good characteristic (for authors):* stops authors from knowing which reviewer has been most supportive in getting their paper or grant application accepted (you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours?).

(Yes, I realize that the good and the bad characteristics of reviewer anonymity are the same from the perspectives of the reviewers and authors.)

### Identity of authors of papers and grant applications

*Good characteristic (for authors):* identifies the authors to the reviewers; in some cases this could help to influence

the reviewers about the impact/novelty/veracity of the work and hence increase the likelihood of acceptance.

*Bad characteristic (for reviewers):* identifies the authors to the reviewers; in some cases this could help to influence the reviewers about the impact/novelty/veracity of the work and hence increase the likelihood of acceptance.

*Bad characteristic (for authors):* the reviewer knows the identity of the authors, has doubts about their previous papers and now has a chance to 'have a go' with this one.

*Good characteristic (for reviewers):* the reviewer knows the identity of the authors, has doubts about their previous papers and now has a chance to 'have a go' with this one.

(Yes, I realize that the good and the bad characteristics of author identity are the same from the perspectives of the reviewers and authors.)

Of course, it could be argued that these 'characteristics', while obvious on paper, are not really an issue in most cases. Most of us are too busy to care who the authors of a paper or grant application are or whether we review each paper from the same clinically objective standpoint. And, after all, we

are all, at one time or another, an author and reviewer (often at the same time and in the same journal!). But, the debate, as I noted at the beginning, still arises. Perhaps the flames of the debate are fanned by those who feel they have been unjustly rejected by reviewers or have been relentlessly pursued, hounded and persecuted by the same set of reviewers. (As an aside on this latter point, I recall being on a review panel for government grant applications. One of the applications came with a long covering letter in which the author of the application listed over three pages – yes, three pages – other scientists who should under no circumstance review his application. Frankly, the reviewers left were outside his field and they found the application incomprehensible!)

I think that reviewer anonymity is useful, but only when the reviewers work in a scholarly way by providing cogent arguments in support of an opinion, direct criticisms of specific experiments and conclusions, and constructive approaches to improving the work. I have in previous pieces complained about the poor quality of some reviews, in which opinions are based on some sort of visceral, emotional response to the work, and the criticisms are vague. The answer is good oversight of reviewers by committed editors who know the work under review and the credibility of the

reviewers, and who have the respect of the authors when they, the editors, render a judgement.

What about the anonymity of authors? I am still not persuaded that this is necessary. If, as a reviewer, you feel influenced by the list of authors, either in a positive way (great lab; then this will be a great paper) or in a negative way (I never liked their work, and it is very unlikely that I will like this paper), then don't review the paper. The editor or grants administrator will not hold it against you (your name will not be added to some list in a black book for future retaliation when you are an author). Trust me: no one cares. Nor do they have the time for that sort of nonsense.

Now, how about the anonymity of people who write op-ed pieces for journals on a variety of topics? Well, I'll paraphrase something I wrote previously: Who am I? You don't need to know. It shouldn't matter to you who I am. Would you have a different reaction to these pieces if you knew my identity, my scientific background, my title, my work environment, my bank balance, my prison record? Probably, but you shouldn't. I have opinions, and the journal gives you a forum for your responses (good or bad).

Caveman

## Letters

JCS welcomes correspondence provoked by articles in all sections of the journal. Responses to articles in the Sticky Wicket section should be sent directly to Caveman (email: [caveman@biologists.com](mailto:caveman@biologists.com)). Correspondence relating to Research Articles, Commentaries and Cell Science at a Glance should be addressed to the Executive Editor and sent to

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