Peer review has come under attack in the past as an imperfect way to maintain and monitor scientific integrity (Nature’s peer review debate, 2006); the most recent attack is a warning to journal editors, publishers, and reviewers that sloppy peer review will be judged harshly by the scientific community (Bohannon, 2013). Bohannon created multiple iterations of a fake research paper and submitted them over the course of several weeks to 304 peer-reviewed journals, all of which were open access and many required fees for submission or publication. The claim in the paper was that the research was new (discovery of anticancer properties of a chemical extracted from lichen) and the science was cutting edge. The paper passed peer review and was accepted by 157 journals; 98 journals rejected the paper after some form of peer review. According to Bohannon (2013), the flaws in the research methods, including the use of different buffers and noncomparable exposures to radiation, were obvious and fatal, and should have been noticed by anyone with some knowledge of chemistry and the ability to read a data chart. He claimed that the fact the paper was actually accepted was evidence that peer reviewers do not really review very carefully, editors do not pre-screen or at least challenge less than rigorous reviews, and publishers who are eager to make money on open access publication will turn a blind eye to editorial processes that are suboptimal. There has been much controversy about this sting, but it is not the first time that something like this has occurred (see the SCiGen Automatic CS Paper Generator developed by students at MIT; http://pdos.csail.mit.edu/scigen/). Despite the controversy over the fake science hoax, the discussion of peer review, publication ethics, and scholarly publishing have taken center stage again for many journals. The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) has recently published COPE Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers, which addresses concerns related to sloppy and unethical reviewing practices; these guidelines are freely available to all (http://publicationethics.org/resources/guidelines).

Peer reviewers, editorial boards, and editors are considered the gatekeepers of the scientific record. We review submissions and provide feedback to authors on the quality of their work as well as make decisions on whether or not to publish a manuscript. Usually authors appreciate this work, but often the review process seems like an impediment to publication or promotion and tenure. As the editor of this journal, managing the peer review process and making decisions on manuscripts consumes the majority of my time. The process goes like this: a manuscript is submitted and once it has passed through the managing editor’s technical check for completeness and a plagiarism check, the record is sent to my inbox (dashboard). I do a prescreening for appropriateness for our readers and a cursory review for obvious fatal flaws. The most common reasons for rejection at this stage are the manuscript (a) has nothing to do with nurse practitioner (NP) practice, (b) is poorly written, (c) lacks essential elements such as ethics approval for research, and (d) is not a priority topic for the journal. Once I have made the decision to send the manuscript through peer review, I search for suitable reviewers in the ScholarOne™ database, assign reviewers, and issue an e-mail invitation to review.

On the reviewer’s end, an invitation to review includes the abstract of the article, a timeline for when the review is due, and a link to accept or decline the review. Reviewers have the option to decline for any reason with a simple click on the computer. Fortunately, for the vast majority of manuscripts, the process goes smoothly; however, there are occasional problems. I know very well that circumstances can change in a reviewer’s life and even one who has accepted the task of performing a review with all good intentions may have to back out for good reason. Rather than perform a substandard review (one that could lead to accepting a manuscript with fatal flaws), I would suggest that the reviewer just send me an e-mail or call me on the phone and ask to be replaced. I prefer to know as soon as possible that a reviewer is unable to complete the task so that I can assign another reviewer. What happens on the author’s end is that the review process is prolonged when I have to replace reviewers who fail to complete their reviews and do not respond to my e-mail reminders. The majority of reviewers in the database are there because they have authored a paper at some time, so some of them have been in the position of asking about the status of their submission. In my opinion, reviewing is a professional obligation, particularly for those who have authored manuscripts and benefitted from the wise counsel of other peer reviewers.

This leads me to the main point of this editorial: I have a number of faithful reviewers who are always willing to help out in a crisis and get a good review done for our authors. I have also relied on many of these people to advise me on technical, scientific, and ethical issues. We have
had our share of problem situations and I am grateful to these individuals for their wisdom and support. Because of changes to the journal processes, the tremendous increase in submissions over the years, and the expansion of our association, I have expanded the size of the editorial board by including these trusted scholars and clinicians whose names you see on the new masthead in this issue. We have had some people retire from the board and I thank them for their years of service. Our focus for the JAANP for the future is to bring our readers outstanding research and systematic reviews to inform evidence-based practice; to publish papers that address some of the serious issues in NP education, particularly at the DNP level; and to consider the evolution of the NP role going forward at the national and international levels as it is affected by major policy agendas.

Finally, I want to thank the peer reviewers who have contributed to the articles we publish with their thorough and thoughtful commentary. Peer reviewers who are knowledgeable about the research in their specialty fields of practice provide valuable feedback to authors about technical aspects of a manuscript; reviewers who are generalist clinicians provide valuable feedback to authors on how practicing NPs could or would use the information in the manuscript. The names of reviewers who completed reviews during the past year are listed on the AANP website under the JAANP link. I am thankful for all who help mind the gate for JAANP.

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Editor-in-Chief

References