Faster Is Better
Andrew P. Schachat, MD - Cleveland, Ohio
George B. Bartley, MD - Rochester, Minnesota

A pervasive advertisement on American television asserts that “faster is better” in the world of cellular telephones. With the assumption that cost and reliability are comparable and reasonable, few would disagree that speed is good. When it comes to the publication of scientific articles, we also believe that faster is better. Authors want to get their work out as quickly as possible, and readers want new information that will help them achieve better outcomes for their patients. But, as with most important issues, balance is necessary. It takes time to obtain expert reviews, for authors to make appropriate revisions, and for the publisher to complete high-quality production work. Speed is desirable, but not at the risk of overlooking—or even causing—errors that may have real-life consequences. Conversely, perfection is not always achievable, even with monumental effort, so editors aim for a Voltairean balance between prompt publication and a good but less-than-perfect product.

In this issue, Chen et al1 discuss “Publication Times, Impact Factors and Advance Online Publication in Ophthalmology Journals.” The authors studied how long it took from submission to publication for various eye journals in 2010 and found that the lag was approximately 75 days for the fastest and approximately 560 days for the slowest. Journals can be measured and compared in a number of ways. One metric relates to the impact factor, which reflects the number of citations of recent articles published in a journal. The authors found no relationship between the impact factor and the duration until publication. But they did find that journals that offer advance online publication—quicker availability of articles to readers—tend to have a higher impact factor than those that do not offer this feature.

We quibble with some of the methodological details of the study, for example, that the authors looked at only a small number of articles (12 for each journal) and tended to select the first article in each issue. The lead article may be generally representative of overall articles in some journals. However, in others the editor may place a “more important” article first in the issue, and more important articles may have been handled differently, that is, more expeditiously. However, we do not quibble with the authors’ punch line. Those journals, this one included, with advance online release of articles tend to have higher impact factors. Many factors besides article quality may affect citation frequency, and many articles have been written about how journal impact factors can be manipulated, but we agree that speed is appreciated.

In 2003, for Ophthalmology, the median time from submission of an article to the time of the initial decision (accept, revise, or reject) was approximately 120 days. With the introduction of faxing and the use of express mail, the time was cut to approximately 60 days. With the introduction of the online article submission system, the time decreased to approximately 30 days and has stayed in that range for some years. Once reviews return to the editorial office, the initial decision is almost always conveyed to the authors within 24 hours. If a revision is requested, the responsibility returns to the authors, some of whom return a revised article in a day, whereas others take weeks or months. Once the revision is received, reconsideration by the editors is usually efficient. Sometimes there may be re-review and further revision, but often not. The next steps to publication—copyediting, figure and table cleanup, reference checking, layout, design, proofreading, print and web formatting, and releasing the online version—are out of our hands and take some weeks, and then a few more weeks to print and mail the hard copy journal.

Much has been written about the delay between publication of translational research and its widespread adoption in clinical practice, with lags reported from months to decades.2 It is beyond the scope of this editorial to solve the challenges of how to do good science faster and how to promote quicker adoption of important recommendations once they are published. But if we agree that faster is better, what are the opportunities to, at least, bring new information to press as rapidly as possible?

Many of our readers and authors may not be aware that to obtain 2 high-quality peer reviews, we typically need to invite 8 or 10 reviewers. At times, we have asked 20. When more than a dozen potential reviewers decline, this may be a hint that an article’s theme is too esoteric, or too boring, to interest the general readership. Sometimes this will prompt a pre-review rejection by the editorial board, but more often we dig further into our reviewer database in hopes of identifying a willing volunteer. Once a reviewer is recruited, many good resources are available, including the Journal’s website,3 to help reviewers improve their skills, including attention to the ethical requirements of the process.4 It may be possible to trim at least a week from the review cycle if reviewers who cannot or do not want to participate would decline the invitation promptly rather than allowing it to languish in their inbox. Reviewers who accept, and who then deliver a thoughtful review within a few days, are much admired, if not adulated, by editors and journal staff.

If authors agree that faster is better, they can find ways to get revisions back to us more quickly. We recall many times when an author took weeks or even months to return a revised article to us, yet noted in the cover letter that he or she anticipated near-immediate publication (!). Yes, we could post a PDF of the accepted article on the Journal’s website and skip copyediting, layout, design, proofreading,
and related publication steps. This would trim a few weeks from the process but with significant downsides. There would be more errors, the article would not be user-friendly, and the final published version with corrections would be different. Having multiple versions of an article in circulation significantly increases the odds for confusion.

An important and manageable step in the process relates to the period between online release and print publication. Journals have page budgets, and each has room or funding to print a defined number of articles per year. We publish approximately 30 articles in each hard copy issue, so approximately 360 articles per year. If we accept more than 1 article per day our backlog grows. Although we could get those extra articles online efficiently, the print version would come out later and later. If one keeps score by tracking the print publication date, speed would suffer. In the article by Chen et al, they used the online release date for the publication date for those journals with an early online feature and the print date for those without. Ophthalmology receives more than 2000 submissions each year, of which more than 360 are worthy of publication if space allows. Although it may not be pleasing to authors, we try to reject good but not top-priority articles quickly to allow authors to publish in another journal.

Of course, we could decide not to print issues at all and move to online-only publication with an increased page count. However, the idea is mistaken that “electrons are free and paper is expensive; therefore, online pages can be infinite.” Online publication still requires all the editorial office work described, and the savings from eliminating paper, ink, and postage are less than one might think. Most journals do not yet have a business model to support online-only publication because advertisers pay more for print advertisements than for online. And readers and authors tell us that they still value receiving and reading a hard copy issue. So, for now, writing the obituary for print is premature.

Your editors do think that faster is better. But we also have great respect for the peer review and publication process, and if important steps are skipped or rushed, errors may follow. We hope the balance is appropriate, and we will continue to search for greater efficiency.

References