

Dear Sirs,

In one comment on the length restrictions of letter-to-the-editors, one of the TRIALS editors stated that:

“The key characteristic of science is not its infallibility, a quality it clearly does not and cannot have, but its self-correcting ability. The decision by medical editors to stifle debate is misguided...”  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.0020126>

Thus, the possibility to disagree with rational argumentation is one essential characteristic of science.

TRIALS describes on its home page:

TRIALS is an open access, peer-reviewed, online journal that will encompass all aspects of the performance and findings of randomized controlled trials. TRIALS will experiment with, and then refine, innovative approaches to improving communication about trials....

Scope of the journal: TRIALS aims to be broad in scope and considers articles covering the following: Articles about a specific randomized trial Secondary analyses

In March 2010, I submitted a manuscript to TRIALS:

“Subgroup analysis of large trials can provide valuable information: a case study of vitamin E and pneumonia”

This is a secondary analysis of the large ATBC study. We found strong evidence that the effect of vitamin E on pneumonia incidence was not uniform over all the participant population. Our findings challenge the rationale for the strong resistance against subgroup analysis. We are not drawing practical conclusions so that we would propose someone to take vitamin E on the basis of our subgroup analysis. Instead, we conclude that:

The overall effect of vitamin E in the ATBC Study implies that there is no justification for further studying the effect of vitamin E on pneumonia, but in contrast, our subgroup analysis suggests a path that should be explored: Does vitamin E affect the incidence of pneumonia in physically active males who are nonsmokers or who have had only little exposure to smoking?

This kind of direction for new research cannot be identified if subgroup analysis is forbidden or strongly discouraged. Thus, our analysis is a case study which shows that subgroup analysis can guide further research. Our conclusion does not seem unjustified on the basis of our findings.

On April 16, we received a rejection letter from associate editor Andrew Vickers:

Peer review of your manuscript is now complete and, in the light of the reports, I am sorry to say that we cannot consider the manuscript for publication and are closing your file...  
If at some stage you are able to fully address all of the referees' concerns, you may wish to consider submitting a new manuscript to Trials. If you are able to do this, a full covering letter, explaining the revisions made, should accompany the submission.

We wrote replies to all comments by the two reviewers (see attachment) and in the cover letter we stated that “It is possible that we have missed or misunderstood some important issues, and in such a case we would hope for a possibility to reply to comments that still need our reply.”

We submitted the replies and the slightly revised manuscript on June 22. On its home pages, TRIALS states that “The Editors will make every effort to reach decisions within 6 weeks of submission.” We received the decision for our submission yesterday (October 28), which means 18 weeks between submission and decision (3 times your goal).

At this time we received only one very short reviewer comment, which was by Andrew Vickers (see link below):

Reviewer's report / Title: Subgroup analysis of large trials can guide further research: a case study of vitamin E and pneumonia / Version: 2 Date: 2 September 2010

Reviewer: Andrew Vickers / Reviewer's report:

The authors have made only minor changes in the paper: for each point made by the reviewer, there is several pages of complex explanation of why the reviewer is wrong.

I find many of these arguments unconvincing. The authors are suggesting something somewhat unorthodox, and I would need to be very compelled by their arguments.

On April 16, Vickers wrote that “If at some stage you are able to fully address all of the referees' concerns, you may wish to consider submitting a new manuscript to Trials.”

It is illogical to reject our manuscript when we have done exactly as he asked on April 16: “for each point made by the reviewer, there is several pages of complex explanation of why the reviewer is wrong.”

It is illogical to require that our replies to extensive and complex comments should be brief. Evidently, had we replied briefly, we would have been criticized for being superficial and not answering on all the comments (April 16 email: “fully address all”).

Vickers does not point out any single example in which case our replies to the first two reviewers are non-valid.

Furthermore, in our cover letter we had written that “It is possible that we have missed or misunderstood some important issues, and in such a case we would hope for a possibility to reply to comments that still need our reply.” Thus, given the extensive comments by the original two reviewers, and the complexity of the disagreements on subgroup analysis, it was possible that we were missing some points, and it seemed fair that we would be allowed to re-consider such issues that we had missed.

Furthermore, given that Vickers report is dated September 2, why does TRIALS make the decision only on October 28? Why is there such a 7 week delay between the review report and the new decision, making the whole review 18 weeks (your goal is 6 weeks).

As noted at the top, one of the TRIALS editors commented: “The key characteristic of science is not its infallibility, a quality it clearly does not and cannot have, but its self-correcting ability. The decision by medical editors to stifle debate is misguided...”

The only open criticism on our manuscript by Vickers is that our manuscript is “unorthodox” (see

above). This is a strange basis for rejecting our manuscript, when one of the editors has explicitly argued that scientific debate should not be stifled.

Often people working in science consider that search for new ways of thinking is important in science. On the TRIALS home page this is reflected by the statement “TRIALS will experiment with innovative approaches...” Innovations are new approaches compared with traditional ways of thinking. In this respect the argument that our manuscript is faulty because it is “unorthodox” and represents non-traditional way of thinking is not in line with the search for innovations by TRIALS.

My personal opinion about manuscript reviewing (which I am obviously doing myself) is that the reviewer should focus on the substance of the manuscript. Are the facts correct and consistent, are the arguments logical, are the conclusions justified by the facts, etc. Vickers' argumentation that our replies to previous criticism are too long and our manuscript is unorthodox is poor kind of manuscript review. He does not formulate any arguments based on the substance of our manuscript, e.g. why our conclusion (see above) would be unjustified by the findings of our study.

On its home page TRIALS states that “Peer reviewers will have ...option ... reject [the manuscript] because [it is] scientifically unsound”. Our long replies to the first two reviewers and the “unorthodox” character of our manuscript do not make our manuscript scientifically unsound. I consider that the rejection of our manuscript with an argument that it is “unorthodox” is not good editorial policy in a scientific journal.

Given that we thoroughly replied to the first two reviewer comments as the associate editor proposed April 16, and Vickers does not have any scientific criticism on our manuscript, following the policy described on TRIALS home page would have led to the publication of our manuscript, and the paper would have been open to “Post-publication peer review” (term used by the editor of TRIALS in text mentioned at the top). Of course, it is possible that some valid criticism might appear, but none were given as the basis for the rejection.

Yours

Harri Hemilä  
[Oct 29, 2010]