



مرکز تحقیقات مراقبت اچ آی وی و عفونت های آمیزشی  
مرکز همکار سازمان جهانی بهداشت

# Preparations for Peer Reviews

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Some slides adopted from Willi Mc Farland and Ali Mirzazadeh with permission

# What we will cover today

- Peer review process
- Purpose of peer review
- How to do the peer review
- How to respond to a peer review

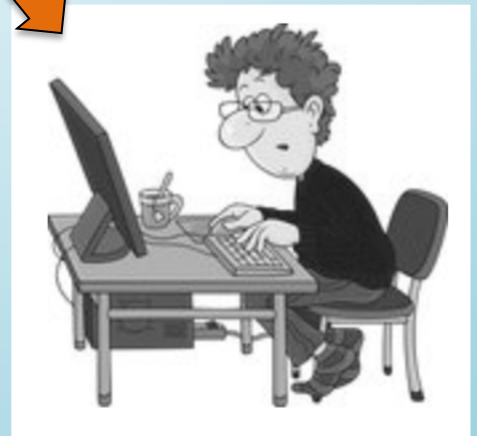
# Peer Review Process



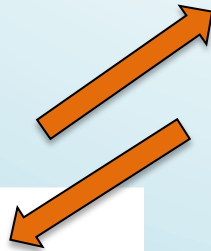
Editor



Reviewer



Author



# Perspective of the author

- I gave this a lot of time and thought!
- I know the design, methods, analysis, interpretation, significance better than a reviewer seeing it one time
- My words are precious
- I want to be accepted for publication – with **as little change as possible**
- The reviewers are mean and stupid



# Perspective of the reviewer



- I am an expert, impartial, objective, constructive, knowledgeable, and not mean and stupid
- It is my decision if this paper has merit (not so!)
- The authors need to see my point of view
- They need to respond with **perhaps lots of changes**
- My feelings will be hurt if I am not listened to

# Perspective of the editor

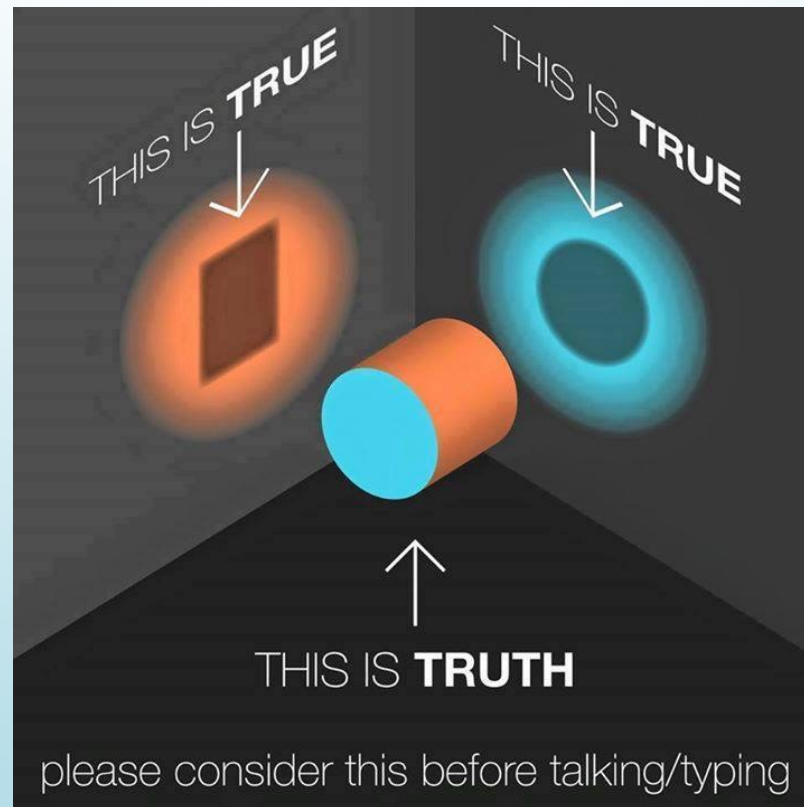
- **I have final say if the manuscript is accepted**
- **I have final say if the changes are sufficient**
- I don't want to publish mistakes, fraud, plagiarism
- Seeking validation from peer reviewers: I already saw merit in the paper
- Seeking “cover” from peer reviewers: I already had doubts about this paper
- **Peer reviewers only advise me as editor**



# Facts check

- Editor usually sides with reviewers against publication (faith in the system, needs to keep happy peer reviewers)
- Might decide in favor when reviews are discrepant
- Sometimes decide against both negative reviewers and accept
- Seem to sometimes decide against favorable reviews (not in scope of journal)

Whatever the role we are into, as a scientist we must be **honest, fair, and skeptical**





# Simple Definition of PEER REVIEW

- a process by which a scholarly work (such as a paper or a research proposal) is checked by a group of experts in the same field to make sure it meets the necessary standards before it is published or accepted

# Expectations for peer review

- Select best papers for publication
- Improve the quality of papers published
- Detect errors, fraud, plagiarism
- Enhance credibility of the journal
- Contribute truth to the world

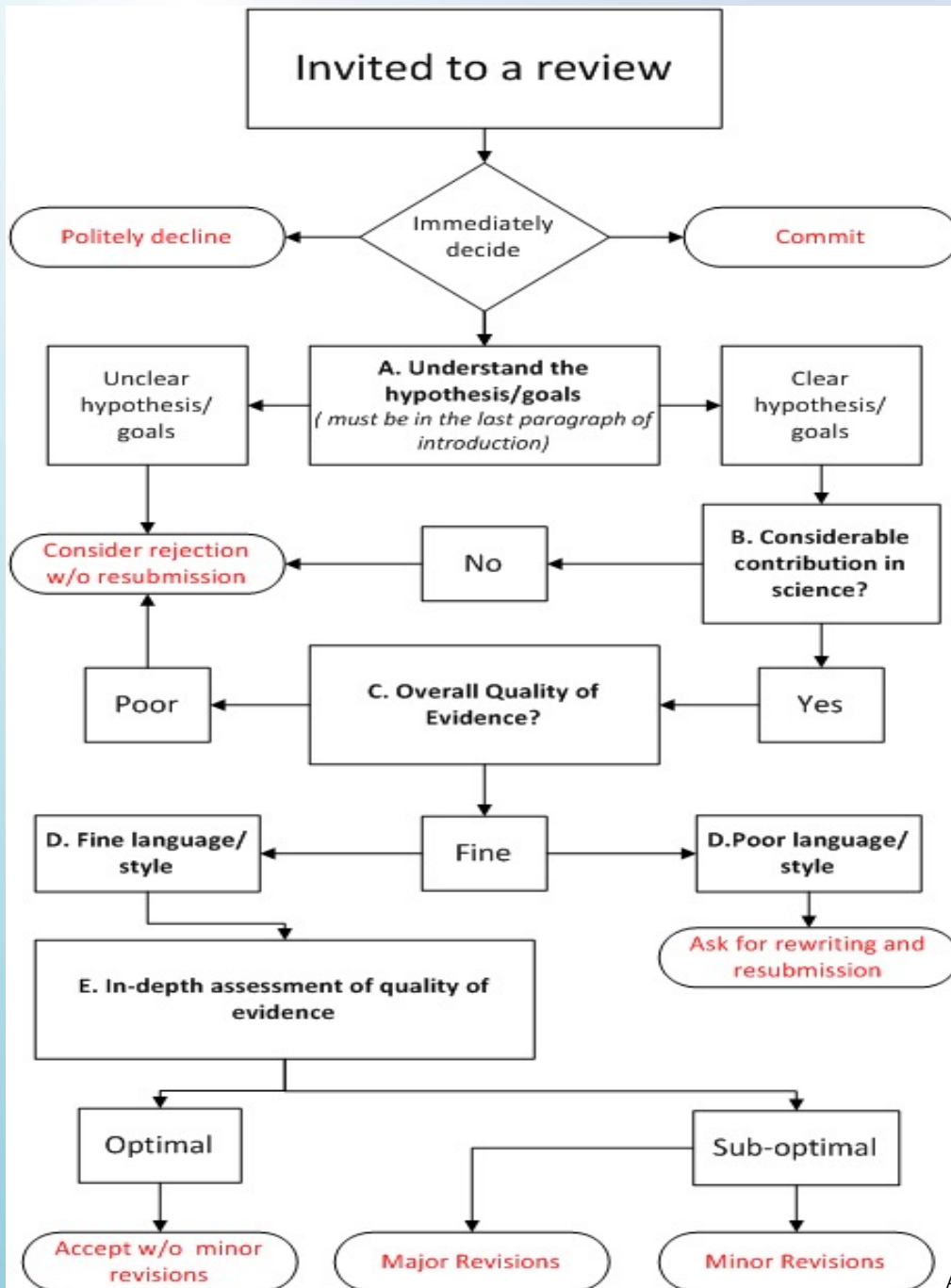
# Key elements of a good peer review

- Identifies major strengths and weaknesses of study design and methodology
- Gives constructive feedback to authors
- Professional tone
- Contributes to editor's decision-making

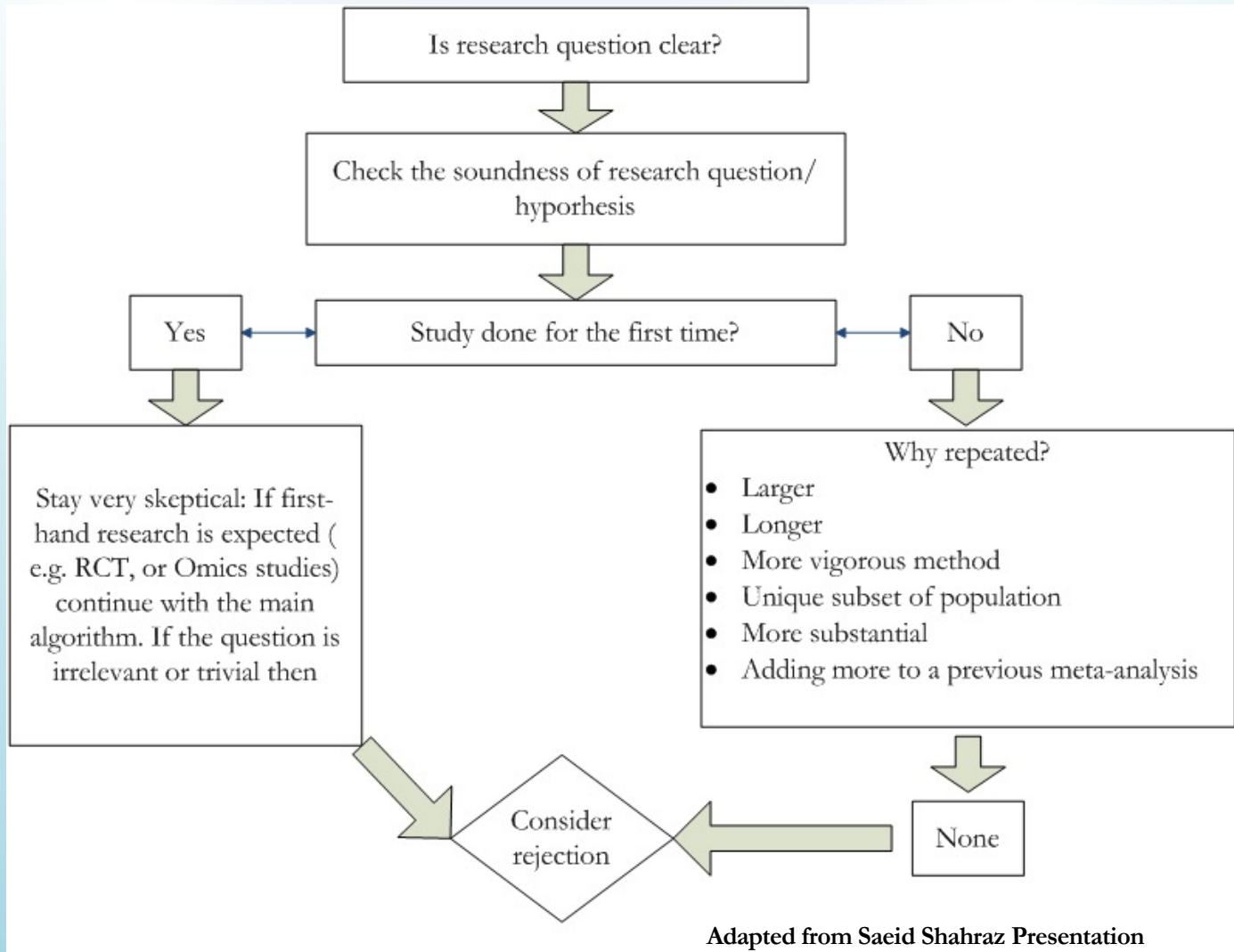
# Decision making / review

- **One-stage review**
  - 2 to 3 peer reviews advise editor on his/her decision
- **Two-stage review**
  - Revised manuscript goes back to reviewers who say whether their concerns were addressed
- **Multiple-stage review**
  - Seeks consensus? Time consuming, burdensome
- **Editor has the final decision**

# Decision Algorithm



# Is hypothesis sound / clear research question?



# Considerable Contribution in Science

- A novel study
- A study with larger sample
- A study with longer duration of follow-up
- A study with more vigorous method
- A study that is more substantial
- A study that is a review of reviews
- A study with a unique population

# Considerable Contribution in Science

- **A novel study is a study that**
  - has not been performed in the past but is deeply rooted in scientific methods
  - has performed in the past but contains a novel feature
- **A study with more vigorous method**
  - Strength of evidence
  - Overall, studies with control groups have higher values
  - Mixed methods contribute more in making strong evidence



# Quality of Generated Evidence

- **Method**
  - Variables?
  - What comparisons were made?
  - Clarity of analysis assumptions and their suitability
- **Results**
  - Statistical power vs. Clinical power
  - Choosing the right results aligned with research question/hypothesis
  - Pick up right measures
  - P-value or 95%CI?

European Journal of Epidemiology  
April 2016, Volume 31, [Issue 4, pp 337–350](#)

# How to do a peer review

## The Feedback Sandwich



← **Positive Feedback**

← **Constructive Feedback**

← **Positive Feedback**



Give positive feedback

Provide constructive criticism

Give positive feedback



# Methods of Peer Review: Reviewer perspective

- 1. Read the paper (and set it aside for a day or so)**
- 2. Summary and broad impression**
  - Paraphrase their methods
  - Paraphrase their conclusions
- 3. Start with finding the good, strengths**
- 4. Carefully articulate major concerns (and how they can be addressed)**
- 5. List minor corrections, other advice**
- 6. End on an overall impression, phrase as positively as warrants**

## Summarize methods, conclusions, and give a broad impression

- Show the editor that you understood it (“got it”)
- Paraphrase the study design (RCT, observational, cross-sectional)
- Paraphrase their conclusions: Give their “message”
- You are priming the authors to appreciate your expertise and be open to your critique
- Signal the editor you understood its value overall

# Summarize methods, conclusions, and give a broad impression

- **Significance of the attempt, the findings, and conclusions**
  - How it addresses an unanswered question
  - How it may improve health
  - How it fits the scope of the journal
- **“Sandwich” feedback: good, criticism, way forward**
- **Civility! Be kind.**

## Example: Summarize methods, conclusions, and give a broad impression

Reviewer #1:

This study aimed to estimate the numbers of female sex workers (FSW) in the two largest cities in Myanmar. I believe this is an important topic, and its results will be very useful for public health interventions targeting this population. Thus, I review this paper with a great appreciation of the authors' effort for this difficult task.

However, major revision is needed for this paper.

# Carefully articulate major concerns

## 1. Types of major concerns

- Methodological, study design (the focus of a review)
- Ethical (rare – but serious, e.g., plagiarism)
- Analysis (few reviewers comfortable statistically)
- Interpretation (does or does not match the data)
- Not novel (Ok and needed, but dampens enthusiasm)

## 2. Always be constructive: Offer what the authors can do to address concerns

## 3. Fall back if nothing can be done: “Author need to acknowledge this limitation”



## Example: Articulate major concerns

1. A major concern is the use of epidemiological complex survey methods in this estimation. First, is there any evidence/reference supporting the applicability and validity of complex survey methods in this estimation method?
2. Second, when multi-stage complex survey is used, weighting process is required in analyses. In this paper, the authors do not calculate and take into account weights for strata and PSU.

# List minor corrections, other advice

- **Types of minor concerns**

- Typos: especially in numbers
- English grammar: Be specific and polite (Do not say “have a native English speaker review this”)
- Style (don’t over do it)

- **Other advice**

- Additional key references (Not for self-promotion or journal promotion!)

## Example: Minor corrections, other advice

10. Page 6, line 9, what does it mean by "to align with the specified time period and survey eligibility criteria of age and residence"?

11. Page 6, line 36, does "township" mean "city" or other levels of geographic division for administrative purposes (e.g., county, district)?

13. The paper should be carefully reviewed and edited for its language. When describing the study in "Methods", the authors should use a consistent tense (e.g. past tense). There are also missing verbs (e.g., page 4, line 42), unparallelled structures (e.g., page 5, line 13), and several run-on sentences.

# Bad and vexing peer reviews!

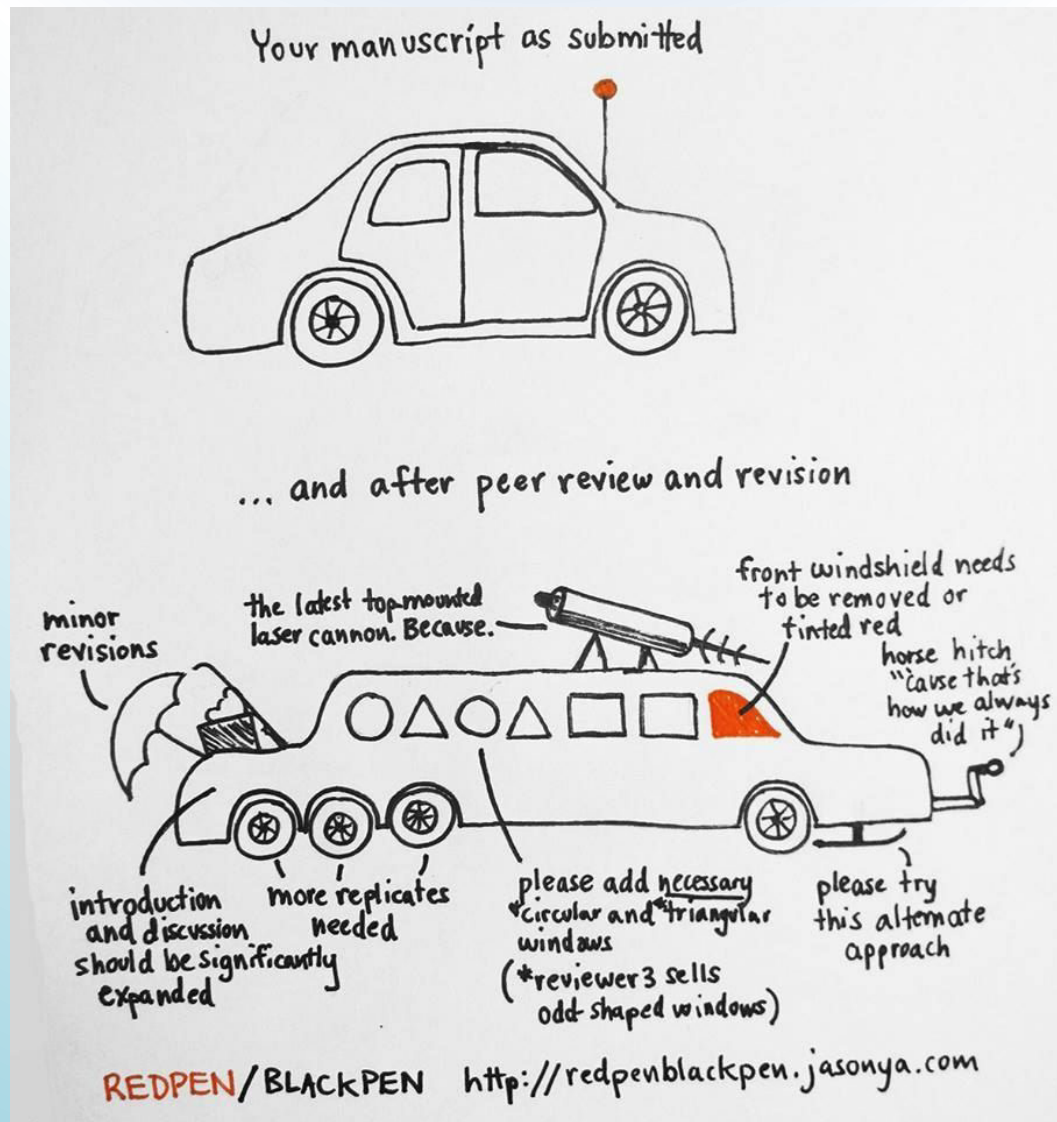
- Uncareful reading: Did not see that the points were made
- Too much: The reviewer becomes the investigator (inexperience?)
- Not specific: unclear what to address, or change

# Bad and vexing peer reviews!

- Not constructive
  - Offer no way forward
  - Or there is nothing you can do about it now:  
“The study you should have done was...”
- Inconsistent between reviewers (editor decides)
- They have an agenda (sabotage?)
- Plainly wrong (reasoned case to editor)

# How to respond to a peer review

# Response to reviewers



# Response to reviewers

## General rules:

- Stay calm and take a deep breath!
- Do not fight with the reviewers!
- Be careful about the tone of your response. Use a neutral tone.
- Keep your distance from your paper to be able to be fair and unbiased about the comments.
- Show your gratefulness if you really find the comment useful (but not excessively!).
- Do not ignore any comments (Do not count on the reviewer's Alzheimer!).



# Response to reviewers

## General rules:

- Try to apply all comments, even if you find them “not necessary”. Exceptions:
  - The comment is not correct.
  - You are not able to apply because of the data limitation.
  - The revision is too difficult and you have strong reason that it is not necessary

# The Author's Response Letter: communicating the changes to the editors

- Be happy!
- Be polite, contrite, civil
- Isolate every comment and address each one
- Explain in cover letter how you changed manuscript
- Can cut and past text you changed into the letter
- Format, template, expectation

# Response letter

**Paragraph 1:**

**“Dear editor: (name is better)**

**Dear Prof. Phurb Dorji:**

**We are happy that *Bhutan Health Journal* will consider publication of our paper pending satisfactory revisions as suggested by the reviewers.”**

# Response letter

## Paragraph 2:

**“We have given careful consideration to all the reviewers’ comments and have done our best to address them all. The following is a point-by-point explanation of how we have address the concerns and revised our manuscript accordingly.”**

# Response letter

**“Reviewer #1.**

**1. The authors should address the question of whether HIV seroconversion is associated with amphetamine use or drug use in general.**

**Answer:** Following the reviewer’s suggestion, we constructed a variable for “any drug use”. Persons with any drug use had elevated risk for unprotected sex (RR=2.3, 95% CI 1.2 – 4.4) compared to non-drug users. For persons who used amphetamine (with or without other drugs) the association with HIV seroconversion was further elevated (RR 3.0, 95% CI 1.4 – 6.5). These new results suggest that amphetamine use is more strongly associated with HIV seroconversion than drug use in general. We have added these results to page 13”

**2. ....**

# Response letter

## Addressing Minor Concerns:

### Reviewer #2.

*“10. Finally, on a minor point, the authors speak of ‘amphetamine use during sex.’ The phrase ‘sex during amphetamine use’ might be better.”*

**Answer:** The point is well taken. We have changed the phrasing to ‘sex during amphetamine use’.”

# Response letter

**Final paragraph: End on a happy note!**

**“We thank the reviewers for their thoughtful comments. With these revisions, we feel the paper has been substantially improved. We hope it will receive favorable consideration for publication in *Bhutan Health Journal*.”**

# Stages of Change

- Changes for minor concerns
- Changes for major concerns
- No change at all? Pick your battles wisely
- Closure, moving on, changes for resubmitting to another journal



# Changes for minor concerns

- **Author should concede all easy, non-essential points – even if you disagree**
  - Grammar, style, format
  - References to include
  - Acknowledge alternative points of view
- **Author should provide requested detail, data**
- **Authors should acknowledge limitation (that you can't change)**
- **Author should highlight responsiveness: Each and every point addressed**

# Changes for minor concerns

**Example: Accept all easy, non-essential points – even if you disagree**

**Reviewer #1.** I also have some minor points the authors need to attend to:

**1. Intro:** some of the descriptions need references.

*Answer: We revised the introduction with updated references about the HIV epidemic in Iran.*

**2. p4, Results:** for CIs you need to add % in parenthesis

*Answer: Done.*

**3. In table 1:** remove the t test in the first row.

*Answer: Removed*

# Changes for minor concerns

**Example: Inclusion of more detail (when you have it)**

**Reviewer #2:** I only have a minor comment: please explain the refusal rates of FSW and gatekeepers of the FSW venues and discuss how will the refusals impact on your results.

**Answer:** *We now include the rates of refusal by FSW and by gatekeepers in the Results section.*

# Changes for minor concerns

## Changes in paper

**Results added recruitment data:** “The sample included FSW recruited at 98 of 353 venues in Yangon and 68 of 129 venues in Mandalay, after 27 venues in Yangon (21.6%) and 11 in Mandalay (13.9%) failed to recruit FSW. The most common reasons for venue recruitment failure were gatekeepers or FSW saying they were “too busy”, denying having or being FSW, and not wishing to participate.”

# Changes for minor concerns

**Example: Each and every point**

**Reviewer #2:** I only have a minor comment: please explain the refusal rates of FSW and gatekeepers of the FSW venues and discuss how will the refusals impact on your results.

**Answer:** *We also comment on the impact of refusal in the Discussion section.*

# Changes for minor concerns

## Changes in paper: Acknowledge limitation

**Discussion acknowledged limitation:** “Our population size methods are subject to refusal rates and other factors that may limit participation of FSW in the cities. We believe the likely direction of the bias, while not known, is towards underestimation as persons who refuse participation in a survey may also refuse services or disclosing FSW status at services.”

# Changes for major concerns

- **Can be most exasperating!**
  - Human nature to disagree with criticism
  - These are often what the reviewer feels are “fatal flaws” and no response may change that
  - A lot of work: more reading, re-analysis, re-writing, throwing away your beloved words
  - Often something you can’t really do anything about
- **But, the author must address each major concern very clearly**

# No change at all?

- **Write a rebuttal letter – then throw it away!**
- **Pick your battles wisely**
- **Have a colleague read it first**
- **Polite, contrite and well reasoned**
  - Editors have to favor the peer reviewers and the usual process
  - May be quicker to resubmit elsewhere



# No change at all?

- **Appeals to editor**

- Should be exceptional
- Be sure you are correct: have a colleague review your letter
- I think it is rare to reverse an editor's decision (there may be reasons other than what peer reviewers said – they provide cover)
- Don't appeal when editor says "Not in the scope of our journal"
- The process may be long: quicker to resubmit elsewhere?

# Peer Review: Theory and Practice

- **Theoretical, ideal:**
  - Select best papers for publication
  - Improve the quality of papers published
  - Detect errors, fraud, plagiarism
  - Enhance credibility of the journal
  - Contribute truth to the world

# Peer Review: Ideal and Reality

- **Practice, Reality: Defects in peer review process**
  - Time delays in disseminating new knowledge
  - Costly
  - Inconsistent, subjective, unreliable, “lottery”
  - Bias (against women, less prestigious institutions, poor regions, negative results)
  - Abuse (theft of ideas, sabotage)
  - Only a little evidence of improved quality of publications

# Post acceptance

- Once you receive the acceptance letter, you can include the paper in your resume as *[in press]*.
- Post-acceptance paper works are serious for the journal. You need to take them seriously and provide them with the required forms/documents as soon as possible.
- Take enough time to carefully check the proof.

Adapted from Behzad Hajjarizadeh Presentation

# Post rejection

- Stay calm!
- Keep your distance from your paper to be able to be fair and unbiased about the comments.
- Take time and revise the paper based on the reasonable comments.
- Take enough time to carefully check the proof.
- Seek advice from a more senior colleague regarding the journal for re-submission
- You have right for appeal after a rejection (not recommended!)