

The Sydney Morning Herald

Peer review system is flawed, scientists say

January 18 2003

A report due out this month from an international collaboration of scientists will argue that the time-honoured system of peer review, which has existed in some form for at least 200 years, is possibly bunk.

Tom Jefferson, of the Cochrane Collaboration Methods Group, said: "If peer review were a new medicine, it would never get a licence.

"We have found little empirical evidence to support the use of peer review as a mechanism to ensure the quality of research reporting, and there is even more depressing evidence about its value in deciding what should be funded."

The study focused on biomedical research, but there "was no reason to assume that the inefficiency of this system would not pertain across other scientific disciplines".

Dr Jefferson's team scrutinised 135 studies designed to assess the evidence that peer review was an effective method of deciding what should be published.

"We had great difficulty in finding any real hard evidence of the system's effectiveness, which is disappointing, as peer review is the cornerstone of editorial policies worldwide," he said.

"Scientists compete with each other for space to publish in the most prestigious and most widely read journals, space is allocated by editors, and peer review plays a big part in the process.

"Publishing is the key to advancement and research riches. Nobel prizes have hinged on peer review, yet it may be seriously flawed. The problem is compounded because scientists can't agree about how the quality of peer review should be measured."

Dr Jefferson's team is calling for a large, well-funded program of research on the effects of peer review.

But does their work cut the mustard? Asked whether it was peer reviewed, Dr Jefferson said: "Yes, and it was done through collaboration rather than in the adversarial way."

The Guardian