ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The *CUAJ* trainee peer-reviewer training program

Pilot evaluation of a structured peer review curriculum for Canadian urology residents and fellows

David-Dan Nguyen[1,2,3], Adriana Modica[1], Andrew E. MacNeily[1,4], Sero Andonian[1,5], Kristen McAlpine[1,2,3], Naeem Bhojani[1,6], Michael Leveridge[1,7]

[1]*Canadian Urological Association Journal (CUAJ)*, Montreal, QC, Canada; [2]Division of Urology, Department of Surgery, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada; [3]Institute of Health Policy, Management and Evaluation, Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada; [4]Department of Urologic Sciences, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada; [5]Division of Urology, Department of Surgery, McGill University, Montreal, QC, Canada; [6]Division of Urology, Department of Surgery, Université de Montréal, Montreal, QC, Canada; [7]Department of Urology, Queen's University, Kingston, ON, Canada

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Appendix available at *cuaj.ca*

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Peer review underpins academic publishing and represents a core scholarly competency; however, most trainees receive little structured or mentored instruction in conducting high-quality reviews. As the demand for rigorous peer review grows, journals must also cultivate the next generation of reviewers. For a society journal such as the *Canadian Urological Association Journal* (*CUAJ*), this cultivation also supports strengthening scholarly capacity within its Canadian urology community. We therefore developed and piloted the *CUAJ* Trainee Peer-Reviewer Training Program.

METHODS: We designed and implemented a one-year, structured, and mentored trainee peer-reviewer training program for Canadian urology residents and fellows. The program included: 1) a didactic seminar introducing principles of peer review, ethical considerations, and best practices; 2) a structured mock peer-review exercise with facilitated group feedback; and 3) completion of three mentored manuscript peer reviews under the supervision of editorial board members, with individualized feedback. Participants completed baseline and exit surveys assessing self-reported knowledge, confidence, and peer-review competencies, as well as providing feedback on the initiative using 10-point Likert scales.

RESULTS: Nine trainees completed the program. Participants reported increased familiarity with the peer-review process (median 7, interquartile range [IQR] 4–8 before vs. 9, IQR 8–10 after, p=0.02) and confidence in conducting peer review (5, IQR 4–8 before vs. 9, IQR 8–9 after, p=0.01). Improvements were also observed across multiple domains of critical appraisal and peer-review skills, including evaluation of study design, statistical methods, interpretation of results, and provision of constructive feedback. Participants reported a high likelihood of continuing to engage in peer review after the program (median 9, IQR 8–10). All participants indicated they would recommend the initiative to other trainees, and overall satisfaction with the program was high (median 9, IQR 8–10).

CONCLUSIONS: The *CUAJ* Trainee Peer-Reviewer Training Program was feasible and well-received by trainees. In its pilot year, the program provided structured exposure to the peer-review process and was associated with improvements in trainees' self-reported familiarity, confidence, and comfort with evaluating key components of scientific manuscripts. This trainee-focused peer-review initiative may represent a practical and sustainable strategy to strengthen the Canadian urology reviewer pipeline while equitably introducing trainees to the principles of critical appraisal and scholarly publishing.

INTRODUCTION

Peer review plays a central role in maintaining the integrity of scientific literature.[1] Within traditional scholarly publishing models, peer reviewers critically evaluate submitted manuscripts and provide recommendations that inform editorial decisions.[2] Journals need a large and dependable pool of reviewers to sustain the peer-review process and ensure timely evaluation of submitted work.[3]

Despite its importance, training in peer review is rarely formalized. In biomedicine, researchers often first encounter peer review only after submitting their first manuscript and learn implicitly from the reviews they receive. Others gain exposure through mentors who involve trainees in manuscript reviews and provide informal guidance. Consistent with this, an international survey of biomedical researchers found that over 80% had never received formal training in peer review, despite most respondents believing such training should be required before acting as a reviewer.[4] This is especially pro-

nounced among early-career researchers and trainees.[5] As a result, exposure to peer review as a trainee remains inconsistent and unequally distributed, limiting equitable opportunities for those without strong mentorship or editorial networks while also contributing to the ongoing shortage of high-quality peer reviewers.[6–8]

Given these challenges, initiatives that formally expose trainees to the peer-review process and broaden participation in peer review may represent an important strategy to strengthen the reviewer pipeline and equitably foster familiarity with critical appraisal and scientific publishing.[9] As such, the *Canadian Urological Association Journal (CUAJ)*, as the national journal for the Canadian urologic community, developed the Trainee Peer-Reviewer Training Program to directly address these unmet needs.

This program provides urology residents and fellows with structured exposure to the academic peer-review process. Through seminars, mock reviews, and supervised formal peer reviews conducted under the mentorship of experienced editors, the program aimed to introduce trainees to the principles and practices of peer review while strengthening the pool of Canadian urology early-career reviewers engaged in scholarly publishing. In this study, we report the results of the pilot year of our program.

METHODS

Study design

This project was conducted as a quality-improvement and program evaluation initiative and did not involve patient data or clinical interventions. Therefore, research ethics board review was deemed unnecessary in accordance with institutional guidelines. All participants provided consent to report their data.

Development of the *CUAJ* Trainee Peer-Reviewer Training Program

The program was developed by members of the *CUAJ* editorial team, namely the trainee section editor (DDN), managing editor (AM), and editor-in-chief (ML). Four other editors (KM, AEM, SA, NB) provided additional input and contributed to the program. The program development team represents a broad range of clinical and editorial experience, including a trainee and senior academic urologists with editorial experiences ranging from fewer than three years to more than 20 years.

The program was designed to introduce trainees to the peer-review process through a combination of structured educational activities and supervised peer-review experience. The final program structure of the pilot was reviewed and approved by the *CUAJ* editorial board.

Program overview

The CUAJ Trainee Peer-Reviewer Training Program consisted of three sequential components that were planned to be delivered over a one-year period between January and December 2025; the pilot program ran until February 2026 due to unexpected delays. The program was associated with no direct financial cost (seminars and mentorship were provided on a volunteer basis by *CUAJ* editorial board members), although it required administrative and logistical support for delivery.

First, participants attended an introductory virtual seminar led by an experienced journal editor (ML). The seminar provided an overview of the peer-review process, including the role of peer review in academic publishing, best practices for reviewing manuscripts, strategies for providing constructive feedback, ethical considerations in peer reviewing, and common pitfalls encountered during manuscript evaluation. The session also included examples of peer reviews, illustrating effective and ineffective approaches. The seminar lasted one hour, and participants received the presentation slides and examples of high-quality peer reviews following the session. The session was recorded as a webinar and is available online (https://www.cua.org/program/64093).

Second, trainees completed a mock peer-review exercise. Participants were divided into three groups based on their chosen areas of intertest: oncology, endourology, and miscellaneous (transplant, andrology). All participants within a group were asked to review the same manuscript and were given one week to submit their written reviews. A subsequent virtual session was held in which a mentor editor (oncology: KM; endourology: SA; miscellaneous: AM) discussed the manuscript, reviewed common strengths and weaknesses observed in the submitted reviews, and answered participant questions.

Third, trainees were required to complete a minimum of three mentored peer reviews for *CUAJ*. To maintain the integrity of the editorial process, each manuscript was reviewed by at least two experienced reviewers as part of the journal's standard review process, and trainees were not assigned as primary reviewers. Trainees completed their mentored reviews as additional evaluations alongside these standard

reviews. After completing each of their reviews, trainees received feedback from their mentor editor via email, with the possibility to meet virtually if they had any specific questions.

Participants who successfully completed all program requirements, including attending the educational sessions and completing the required peer reviews were added to the journal's roster of active peer reviewers.

Eligibility criteria

Trainees were eligible for this program if they were a urology resident or fellow who was currently training or had recently graduated (<1 year) from a Canadian institution. Trainees had to be available to attend the educational sessions and willing to complete the required peer reviews during the program year. Participants were also required to complete baseline and exit surveys as part of the program's evaluation.

Program evaluation

Participant experiences and self-reported development/growth were assessed using baseline and exit surveys administered before and after completion of the program. The baseline survey was delivered in November 2024, while the exit survey was delivered in January 2026. Surveys evaluated participants' self-reported knowledge, confidence, and familiarity with the peer-review process using Likert scales (1: Not very important/confident/likely; 10: Very important/confident/likely) (Appendix available at *cuaj.ca*).

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics are presented. For questions that included both pre- and post-program assessments on a 10-point Likert scale, responses were compared using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. In addition to comparing pre- and post-program summary scores, we report the proportion of participants whose scores improved following the program.

A two-sided $p<0.05$ was considered statistically significant. All statistical analyses were conducted using Stata/MP 14 (StataCorp LLC, College Station, TX, U.S.).

RESULTS

Baseline participant demographics

We received 11 eligible applications, of which nine trainees (82%) completed the program; one withdrew at the start due to lack of time, while another was removed from the program for not completing reviews despite followup attempts. Participants included five fellows (56%) and four residents (44%). Two participants (22%) held an MSc and one (11%) held a postgraduate diploma related to research, while six (67%) had no graduate research training. Eight (89%) respondents indicated interest in an academic career, while one (11%) was unsure. The participants who completed the program had all previously published, with a median of 15 papers (interquartile range [IQR] 10–18). Prior to the program, five participants (56%) had previously been invited to peer review for a journal, whereas four (44%) had only contributed to reviews via their mentors. The median number of completed peer reviews before participating in the initiative was three (IQR 2–9) with three (33%) participants having previously peer reviewed for *CUAJ*.

Additional baseline characteristics, prior exposure to peer review, goals for participation, and perceived challenges among trainees in the *CUAJ* Trainee Peer-Reviewer Training Program are presented in Table 1.

Program delivery and feedback on program components

Between January and December 2025, all planned didactic activities were successfully completed. At the time of the exit survey (January 2026), four participants (44%) had completed two peer reviews and five (56%) had completed at least three peer reviews. The program was extended to February 2026 to allow all participants to complete remaining peer reviews.

Participants rated the seminars and mock reviews as highly useful, with a median score of 9 (IQR 8–10). Perceived adequacy of mentorship and guidance was also rated positively, with a median score of 7 (IQR 7–9). In narrative feedback, participants highlighted the value of gaining insight into the "behind-the-scenes" aspects of the editorial and peer-review process.

Change in self-reported comfort with peer review and critical appraisal of various components of research submissions

Participants reported increased familiarity with the peer-review process, with median scores rising from 7 (IQR 4–8) at baseline to 9 (IQR 8–10) at exit ($p=0.02$). Confidence in conducting peer review also improved significantly, increasing from a median of 5 (IQR 4–8) to 9 (IQR 8–9) ($p=0.01$). Improvements were similarly observed across multiple domains related to critical appraisal and peer-review skills, including evaluation of study design, statistical methods, interpretation of results, and provision of structured and constructive

Table 1. Baseline characteristics, prior exposure to peer review, goals for participation, and perceived challenges among trainees in the *CUAJ* trainee peer-reviewer training program (N=9)

Characteristic	Value
Participant characteristics	
Graduate training in research	
Diploma	1 (11%)
MSc	2 (22%)
None	6 (67%)
Interest in an academic career	
Yes	8 (89%)
Unsure	1 (11%)
Peer-reviewed publications, median (IQR)	15 (10–18)
Familiarity with the peer-review process (1–10), median (IQR)	7 (4–8)
Peer reviews contributed, median (IQR)	3 (2–9)
Envisions providing peer review in future career	9 (100%)
Prior exposure to peer review	
Directly peer reviewed for journals	5 (56%)
Peer reviewed at mentor request	6 (67%)
Never exposed to peer review	1 (11%)
Primary goals for participating in the initiative	
Gain insight into the peer-review process	8 (89%)
Improve critical appraisal skills	9 (100%)
Improve academic writing	8 (89%)
Network with experts in the field	6 (67%)
Build academic CV	6 (67%)
Confidence the initiative will help achieve goals (1–10), median (IQR)	9 (9–10)
Perceived challenges to becoming a peer reviewer	
Lack of training	7 (78%)
Time constraints	6 (67%)
Lack of confidence evaluating papers	5 (56%)
Limited understanding of research areas	3 (33%)
Difficulty being added to reviewer pool	2 (22%)
Writing structured peer-review feedback	0 (0%)

feedback (Table 2). Across domains, 78–100% of participants demonstrated improvement in their self-reported scores.

Perceived impact on future engagement in peer review

Participants reported a strong perceived impact of the program on their future engagement with peer review and academic publishing. All respondents indicated that participation increased their interest in peer reviewing and made them feel more prepared to incorporate peer-review activities into their future careers. At the conclusion of the program, participants reported a high likelihood of continuing to engage in peer review, with a median score of 9 (IQR 8–10).

Participation in the program also influenced broader academic interests. All respondents (9/9, 100%) reported increased interest in peer reviewing. Six participants (67%) reported increased interest in publishing, and six (67%) reported increased interest in pursuing editorial or journal roles. Two participants (22%) reported increased interest in conducting research. No respondents reported decreased interest in any of these aspects. All participants indicated that they would be willing to serve as mentors for future trainees participating in the *CUAJ* Trainee Peer-Reviewer Training Program.

Participant overall evaluation and feedback

All participants answered that they would recommend this initiative to other trainees. Overall, participants were very satisfied with the program, with a median score of 9 (IQR 8–10) on a 10-point scale.

In their narrative feedback, seven (78%) participants suggested additional program activities related to mentorship and seminars/lectures. Three (33%) specifically recommended a session on statistics.

DISCUSSION

Our evaluation of the pilot year of the *CUAJ* Trainee Peer-Reviewer Training Program suggests that the program was feasible to implement and highly valued by participants. The program required no direct financial resources and relied on a sustainable volunteer base from the *CUAJ* editorial team, with administrative and logistical support, suggesting it is feasible to maintain over time. Participant responses from the pilot year suggest that the initiative can help expand peer-review capacity within Canadian urology while addressing gaps in formal academic training and supporting trainees in developing competencies aligned with the CanMEDS Scholar role.[10] Although the long-term impact remains to be evaluated, we achieved our primary objective of exposing trainees to the peer-review process and

providing a structured introduction to it. Feedback from this inaugural year will guide future refinements and iterations of the program.

Our findings suggest that structured exposure to the peer-review process through a mentored training program can increase trainees' familiarity with peer review and their confidence in evaluating key elements of scientific manuscripts. These observations are consistent with prior educational initiatives in urology and other fields demonstrating that structured training can increase participants' confidence in conducting peer review and their interest in participating in the peer-review process.[11-13] Together, these findings suggest that targeted educational interventions may represent a practical approach for engaging trainees in scholarly activities and strengthening the pipeline of future peer reviewers within the specialty.

We also identified opportunities for further program development (Table 3). Participants expressed interest in additional curriculum content focused on biostatistics. This aligns with prior evidence: in a 2020 survey of Canadian urology trainees, Couture et al reported that many respondents felt they lacked sufficient training in biostatistics and expressed interest in further education in this area.[14] The *CUAJ* Trainee Peer-Reviewer Training Program may provide an appropriate platform to deliver such training, for example, through lectures and educational materials that would also be made available to members of the CUA.

Beyond biostatistics, we also identified a need to familiarize *CUAJ* peer reviewers with the rapidly evolving landscape of reporting guidelines. Future iterations of the program will therefore include dedicated training on the use and interpretation of major reporting frameworks. Other lectures are in development.

Narrative feedback and the implementation of the program highlighted several challenges. First, coordinating sessions and scheduling meetings between trainees and mentors on an ad hoc basis proved difficult, reflecting competing clinical and academic commitments, contributing to delays in some program activities.

Second, manuscripts for review were not distributed according to a consistent schedule, which further limited opportunities for timely engagement with the peer-review component of the program. From a logistical perspective, these challenges were not unexpected for a pilot year. Future iterations will adopt a more structured and condensed timeline aligned with the academic calendar, with program activities roughly scheduled monthly while avoiding major vacation periods and other high-demand intervals for trainees and mentors.

Table 2. Pre- and post-program self-reported familiarity, confidence, and peer-review competencies among trainees participating in the *CUAJ* trainee peer-reviewer training program

Domain	Baseline score, median (IQR)	Exit score, median (IQR)	p comparing baseline and exit score	Improved, n (%)
Familiarity with peer review	7 (4-8)	9 (8-10)	0.02	8 (89%)
Confidence in peer review	5 (4-8)	9 (809)	0.01	8 (89%)
Study design	6 (4–6)	9 (8–9)	<0.01	9 (100%)
Statistical methods	3 (2–4)	7 (7–8)	<0.01	8 (89%)
Interpretation of results	6 (4–6)	9 (8–9)	<0.01	9 (100%)
Study limitations/bias	5 (4–6)	9 (8–9)	<0.01	9 (100%)
Writing quality	6 (4–8)	9 (8–10)	0.02	7 (78%)
Figures/tables quality	5 (4–7)	9 (8–10)	0.01	8 (89%)
Abstract quality	6 (4–7)	9 (9–10)	<0.01	9 (100%)
Scientific relevance	5 (4–6)	9 (8–10)	0.02	7 (78%)
Structured peer review	4 (3–5)	9 (8–10)	<0.01	8 (89%)
Constructive feedback	4 (3–5)	9 (9–9)	0.01	7 (78%)

Third, the approach to peer-review mentorship varied across mentors and was not standardized. In future cycles, we plan to introduce clearer guidance and structured expectations for mentors to promote consistency in the mentorship experience while preserving flexibility for individualized feedback.

Limitations

Our study has limitations. First, peer reviewers of the first years of this initiative were highly selected considering their previous exposure to peer review and strong track record of publication. While there were still significant perceived benefits, it is unclear how generalizable this program is to more novice participants.

Second, the primary aim of this pilot initiative was to expose trainees to the peer-review process and address a gap in formal education in academic urology publishing, while beginning to build a pipeline of reviewers who can gain experience as they progress through training and their scholarly careers; however, we did not emphasize or evaluate the quality of the produced reviews. Prior studies have shown that similar short-term educational interventions have limited impact on reviewer quality or performance.[15,16] Informed by this literature, our a priori focus was thus on structured exposure to peer review and professional development rather than attempting to drive significant improvements in peer-review quality.[17] We envision continued effort and opportunities to provide more advanced training in peer review to graduates of

Table 3. Overview of pilot year program elements and proposed activities for future iterations

Program component	Pilot year activities	Proposed enhancements
Educational seminars	Participants attended a one-hour introductory virtual seminar led by an experienced journal editor covering the peer-review process, best practices for manuscript evaluation, constructive feedback, ethical considerations, and common pitfalls. Slides and examples of high-quality peer reviews were shared after the session, and the webinar was recorded.	Add a dedicated lecture on biostatistics for peer reviewers and a second lecture on reporting guidelines and research appraisal frameworks relevant to manuscript review.
Mock peer-review exercise	Participants were divided by area of interest and completed a mock review of a selected manuscript. Each group then participated in a mentor-led virtual discussion reviewing strengths and weaknesses of submitted reviews and addressing questions.	Retain the mock review exercise, while providing participants with access to high-quality anonymized reviews received by the journal to illustrate strong reviewing practices.
Mentored formal peer reviews	Participants completed at least three formal peer reviews over a 12-month period under the supervision of mentor editors. Trainees were not assigned as primary reviewers, and feedback was provided after completion of their reviews.	Introduce more formal mentorship expectations, including scheduled mentor-mentee meetings, group meetings with multiple mentor-mentee pairs, clearer feedback requirements, and more structured longitudinal oversight during the review process. Introduce a near-peer mentorship program between recent graduates of the program and current trainees.
Program completion and integration into reviewer pool	Participants who completed all program requirements received a certificate signed by the managing editor and editor-in-chief and were added to the journal's roster of active peer reviewers.	Continue certification and transition of graduates into the reviewer pool, with monitoring of the program's longer-term impact on trainee scholarly development and engagement in peer review.

the *CUAJ* Trainee Peer-Reviewer Training Program and existing active reviewers.

Nonetheless, our experience suggests that the initiative is sustainable, requiring minimal ongoing involvement from *CUAJ* editorial team members, while contributing to the development of peer-review capacity within our community. Early exposure of trainees to the editorial process through the role of peer reviewer can equitably broaden pathways to research engagement, journal involvement, and other scholarly roles for early-career researchers,[6] strengthening the Canadian academic urology community.

Our initiative also illustrates how a collaboration between a professional society (CUA), its academic journal (*CUAJ*), and the trainees of its urology training programs can use peer review as a structured educational tool to support scholarly development.[18] In the future, we will explore partnering with the residency training programs themselves. For example, participation in the initiative could reasonably be recognized through an entrustable professional activity within the competence-by-design curriculum.

CONCLUSIONS

The *CUAJ* Trainee Peer-Reviewer Training Program was feasible to implement and well-received by participating trainees. In this pilot year, the program successfully provided structured exposure to the peer-review process and was associated with improvements in trainees' self-reported familiarity, confidence, and comfort with evaluating key components of scientific manuscripts. Participants also reported increased interest in providing a peer review and related academic activities, suggesting that early and structured exposure to the editorial process may help cultivate future reviewers and support engagement with scholarly publishing.

These findings suggest that trainee-focused peer-review initiatives may represent a practical approach to strengthening the *CUAJ* reviewer pipeline while building scholarly capacity within the Canadian urology community and equitably introducing trainees to the principles of critical appraisal and scientific publishing. Future iterations of the program will incorporate refinements and additions informed by participant feedback and evaluate longer-term outcomes.

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CORRESPONDENCE: Dr. David-Dan Nguyen, Division of Urology, Department of Surgery, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada; daviddan.nguyen@mail.utoronto.ca