McMaster Program for Faculty Development (MacPFD)

Spark Podcast

Official Transcript

Episode Number: Sparkle Episode IX
Title of Episode: Health Professions Education Research (HPER**)**
Producer: Nick Hoskin
Music by: Scott Holmes
Featured Guests: Dr. Mary Beth DeVilbiss and Dr. Laura Roberts
Interviewer: Dr. Teresa Chan
Date of original release: December 15, 2021

Ruth Chen (00:02):
Welcome to the MacPFD Sparkle podcast. This is Ruth Chen and in this Sparkle sub-series, we'll bring you shorter segments released in between our longer Sparkle episodes. We'll have new and exciting interviews with professionals from across the world helping you to achieve your personal and professional goals as a healthcare educator, researcher, leader or practitioner at any stage of your career. So sit back, listen and enjoy this episode of The MacPFD Sparkle podcast.

[music]

Ruth Chen (00:36):
Today, we will hear a special health professions education research interview with Dr. Teresa Chan, who will speak with managing editor, Dr. Mary Beth DeVilbiss and Editor-in-Chief, Laura Roberts from Academic Medicine, one of the top journals in health professions education research. And perhaps this interview will inspire you to check out McMaster's very own HPER curriculum at macpfd.ca. The link is in the description of this episode.

Dr. Teresa Chan (01:06):
Alright. Hello everyone. Welcome to this mini-featured podcast for the HPER manual and curriculum. This is Teresa Chan, you've heard my voice before, I've been on other parts of the podcast within the curriculum and it is my same pleasure to bring you an inside scoop behind one of the top journals in health professions education research. So I'd like to introduce to you two people who are essential to making things work at Academic Medicine and actually, I'm gonna ask them to introduce themselves. So maybe Mary Beth, will you introduce yourself?

Dr. Mary Beth DeVilbiss (01:38):
Sure. Thanks, Teresa. I'm Mary Beth DeVilbiss. I am the managing editor of Academic Medicine. I have been with the journal for 17 years. I've kind of worked in every capacity so I'm hoping to be able to give some good insights into the review process, how the staff works, the editing process that we engage in and what it's like to work behind the scenes there. Thanks a lot.

Dr.Teresa Chan (02:00):
Amazing. And last but not least, Dr. Laura Roberts.

Dr. Laura Roberts (02:04):
I'm Mary Beth's little grasshopper. [chuckle] I've been the Editor-in-Chief of the journal, gosh, year and a half now. Started formally in January 2020. I am the Chair of Psychiatry and professor of psychiatry at Stanford University and have pretty extensive experience working with a few different journals and really excited to talk with you today.

Dr. Teresa Chan (02:27):
Well, thank you to you both for joining me on this mini, mini short adventure behind the scenes. So just like any kind of good behind the scenes show, can we give a little bit of that history of this journal and where it's meant to be, what's the target audience? 'Cause we talk about that in our modules about how you need to understand what the... Kind of also case the joint, really gotta understand the journal the way it's meant to, supposed to read couple of articles from the journal maybe in the style of the article that you're gonna submit to. So you're gonna feel for the journal.

Dr. Teresa Chan (03:00):
But in an elevator pitch, what is the perspective that we have for this journal? Like it is broadly health professions education and research that we're talking about but specifically, I think academic medicine focuses on medical education. So I thought maybe, could you explain where the position of the journal is in the field?

Dr. Laura Roberts (03:18):
I'll start, but I'm gonna ask Mary Beth to comment a little bit historically. I think I may be stretching the journal in terms of its mission just a little bit. I see academic medicine as a field responsible for doing wonderful work in real time to improve the health of people and populations, but also, the overarching goal is to really change the future through lots of different methods, discovery, education, innovation and clinical care, community engagement and leadership in the field that's very intentional. And so it's a little bit broader and for me, the journal should map onto all of these missions and approaches of academic medicine and it should be built on a platform of very careful stewardship of resources, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and professionalism. So I have this way of conceptualizing academic medicine as a field and a profession and how the health professions fit with that.

Dr. Laura Roberts (04:16):
And then the journal, I would like to see content related to all of those different areas. But there's no question that medical education... And I hope health professions education a little bit more broadly, is first among equals with these missions. With the awakening of such important issues around diversity, healthcare access, threats to global well-being, I do think we do have to stretch the mission of the journal, but I think for all of us who have loved the journal, the journal was one of the very first places I've published in a lot. It's the place that many people seek to publish and I think our first love as teachers and medical educators.

Dr. Laura Roberts (04:57):
Mary Beth, if you wanna give a little bit more of a historical perspective 'cause I don't know how many editors you've worked with, but we probably all bring our own special, I don't know, blend [chuckle] to the job.

Dr. Mary Beth DeVilbiss (05:08):
Definitely. That's right. So you are my fourth editor to work with, and of course, it changes just a

little bit with every editor but I think at the core of it, we've been consistent kind of looking at the full spectrum of medical education, undergraduate, graduate medical education, faculty issues, institutional issues, continuing professional development. I think that we see ourselves in the field of health professions education scholarship offering content that can sort of be informing the efforts in real practice. So beyond the theoretical, beyond just kind of thinking up high in the sky, it's how does this thing change our thinking in practice on the ground?

Dr. Mary Beth DeVilbiss (05:56):
I also wanted to acknowledge the journal's kinda of long time commitment to the humanities in health professions education. We have several long-running monthly features, medicine in the art being I think the oldest of the bunch, teaching and learning moments, which are personal vignettes often by trainees, and then our cover art feature, which appears of course on the cover every month, so we... In addition to that topic of humanity in the Medical Education appearing in our peer-reviewed content, we actually have carved out space for that in every issue of the journal for a long time now.

Dr. Teresa Chan (06:32):
Well, that's really exciting. It kind of situates the conversation that we'll have. So, Mary Beth, I'm gonna ask you to maybe... You're mostly behind the scenes, so I'm an author, I've scoped out the journal, I've done my due diligence, I've formatted it, I've met every detail and the author guidelines, been confused, emailed you a couple of times, fixed it all, and I've just hit submit. What happens in the journal after that?

Dr. Mary Beth DeVilbiss (06:53):
So every submission is screened by a member of our staff to make sure that, right... Just like you said, all the I's are dotted and the t's are crossed, figuratively speaking, and if there is a problem, typically, we will move forward anyway, we're not going to reject a submission or withdraw a submission because the wrong font was used or because the margins are not the right... [chuckle] the right setting or anything like that. At that stage, we on the staff sort of confirm that everything is present and accounted for, and then it goes to one or more members of our editorial team to be reviewed, to be sort of triage, I guess is the right word. So often times, one of our associate or deputy or assistant editors will first take a look and decide whether to send the paper to external peer review or to recommend that it be declined without external review.

Dr. Mary Beth DeVilbiss (07:52):
At that stage, it would go to Dr. Roberts were the final decision, if it's not going to be sent to external peer review. So Dr. Roberts has the final decision on every submission, with the exception of those that have a conflict of interest at her institution, which is Stanford University. So in those cases, a deputy editor acts as the proxy for her, but if it does go to external review, then we always get at least two external peer reviewers to provide feedback about the submission before the editorial team takes another look and decides whether or not to move forward at that stage.

Dr. Teresa Chan (08:30):
And so if people put things together, they're submitting and then they may or may not get kind of that desk rejection that we call... That "No, thanks. This isn't a good fit." Straight off the bat, no review or comments, just generally speaking, just not a great fit for our journal at this time, you have a really well-worded email that is very kind even when it's maybe not the best news. But at the same I do think that a lot of the time we tend to, I think, appreciate the fast turn around, and I think that

that's one of the things that I find as an author, I wanna move on to the next journal. So I don't think a desk rejection is bad, as long as it doesn't take eight months to generate it, and I think that at least at this journal, which obviously I'm one of your associate editors right now, so I can speak to the fact that I try to get on those as soon as humanly possible, so that the authors can move on, and I think that it's kind of that cruel to be kind of... But it's kind to be actually a little bit... Not cruel, but just immediate in our reaction.

Dr. Mary Beth DeVilbiss (09:31):
No, that's right, and I think that's something that we really recognize and try to adhere to, understanding that if the news is gonna be bad, we want it to be bad as soon as possible, so that we don't waste a lot of time, a lot of your valuable time as an author, you do have the chance to try another journal as soon as possible. Right now, we are able to get those reject without review decisions back to authors, usually within one week, sometimes if there's more conversation, perhaps a little longer but that's really what we aim for, so again, really keeping in mind that time is valuable and we can make that commitment.

Dr. Teresa Chan (10:08):
And now we'll go to Laura maybe, can you tell us a little bit more about what kind of is in the mind of the editors usually when they're sending a paper out for review, because I think that that changes, that's an editorial tastes and methods kind of perspectives, could you say, when you're teaching us how to get through the day with our papers that we sent for review, what are we looking for and what are we thinking?

Dr. Laura Roberts (10:32):
Well, the editor's role is to try and help the authors bring forward their best work. And so when we send a paper for review... Sometimes we don't send papers for a review even though they're lovely papers, and it could be that we have numerous papers in a similar topic, there are many reasons that are independent of actually the quality of an individual paper that lead to a desk rejection, but let's say we decide that we will proceed with the paper that we think has value and has value specifically in relation to our mission and our readers and the readers we hope to have. And when we send it to the reviewers, we're looking for comments that will help discern whether the work is ready to be moved forward for publication, and then given that kind of just general up down decision how to improve the work so that it is the best possible presentation in terms of clarity, the relevance and rationale for the work, why would someone read it and benefit from it, the methodological rigor, the clarity of the presentation is a findings and then interpretation and application, as Mary Beth was emphasizing, that will allow it to make a difference in the world.

Dr. Laura Roberts (11:51):
So when we send it out for review, we are often sending it to content experts, but sometimes we'll be talking with methodological experts to help us think about how to support the authors in advancing the best work, if it really feels like it's ready, sometimes it's not. And there's more developmental work that needs to happen where it's a great idea, but we need data, we need outcomes, we need something that tells us that this great idea about an intervention or an innovation is different or better than the next great idea of an intervention or innovation. Anyways, when we send things out for review, it's meant to be constructive. It's meant to fulfill one of the responsibilities of professionalism, which is self-observation, critique, rigour, and advancing the work, identifying any potential flaws or fatal flaws in the work, and then helping to advance the field through that process.

Dr. Teresa Chan (12:46):
And when you talk about fatal flaw, people talk about that, but what are maybe the top three fatal flaws that you often see people have in their papers so that we can all maybe screen it, right on work before we even submit.

Dr. Laura Roberts (12:58):
I mean, I already regret using that phrase, but what I would say is there are sometimes problems that we just can't overcome in advancing their work, something I see all the time is, say, a web-based survey posing a broad question, and it isn't really tied to say a base population that we know and understand, there isn't clarity around the kind of question that's being proposed. It's not clear whether in any way the people who will respond are representative. Maybe there are things about how the analysis have been done that could distort whatever findings are there, and we have really really sophisticated quantitative people to help us think about that, something that I fuss over all the time has to do with clarity of the presentation of the findings. Often people are overly inclusive or overly complicated, and it really doesn't pose a question, engage in a thoughtful analysis or approach to it, and then provide an answer to the question that then helps to advance the field.

Dr. Laura Roberts (14:10):
So it's that kind of thing that I tend to look for, and it isn't that they are fatal flaws, but maybe some papers do it better than others, and sometimes they're just such significant methodological problems that we can't go forward with the work. Now, the reason I say I regret using the phrase fatal flaw is that it depends a lot on the status of a field, for example, if something is very early on, there isn't much evidence in the area, it's conceptually novel. The quality of the data and quality of the outcomes are not gonna be as strong, and that's just the nature of science, the nature of inquiry processes, they become more rigorous and more precise over time, we hope more accurate too. I can give you an example of something that does not work for us, which is like an intervention, not well described, not well rationalized, and then we get something at the end that says, "And the learners liked it."

Dr. Laura Roberts (15:06):
You know, it's not something that we can accept. We have so many papers. My gosh, we reject, we have to reject so many papers, and that is, I think really hard on all of us. We know that people are working so hard to put this work together and it's... They're putting their little tender hearts out on the paper, and we have to decline them, but the overarching goal is to help them eventually do better and better work and to support the authors and support the field.

Dr. Teresa Chan (15:37):
And so we've walked through the behind-the-scenes. I think they wanna give a shot all the people who do editorial work 'cause they know how hard it is, so all the fellow assistant and associate editors and deputy editors doing all that work, but then also we have editorial assistance and administrators that help us keep the workflow going. We also have a lot of reviewers who do so much paperwork, and I think the academic assistance stands out in my mind because it actually does reward reviewers in a very meaningful way. I honestly fell over off my chair, I think the first time I got an email saying that I won an award for peer reviewing, and I thought that that was just something you're supposed to do, 'cause it's the right thing to do, it's like how we keep the science moving, and yet it was so nice to get a little award, I would say that I probably wouldn't be on the editorial board had you guys not given me that award earlier on.

Dr. Teresa Chan (16:26):
'Cause I probably wouldn't have done more reviews and I might not have found my niche in helping others bring the best out of their science, and I think that reviewers do a really great job at that, and those of you who have during the pandemic stepped up to the plate when we've had a record-breaking amount of science being put forth, whether it was COVID or not didn't matter, it was coming out, and so it's been just so amazing to see that, but the reviewers do so much work, and I am glad that the journal, at least this journal in particular, does consider those awards and I've actually been able to use this journal as an exemplar to other journals who didn't have awards. I'm like, It's just a piece of paper or an email PDF even that you're sending someone a letter saying that they do a great job on reviews, and there's such as precious commodity that it's been an easy sell and so that it is to make it honorable, let's put it that way for people who are doing great work.

Dr. Mary Beth DeVilbiss (17:17):
I'm glad you brought that up. It's something that we started doing, I can't even remember now, probably more than 10 years ago, but at the same time, we were looking for a way to make sure that that contribution was elevated and recognized because it is a volunteer act and you're right. It's what makes science happen, but we literally couldn't exist without our volunteer peer reviewers, and especially the ones who are making time among other multitude of tasks and clinical duties and education duties and all these things to take the time to not only weigh in. Is this a good paper for you to publish, but here's how to make it better, and here's something to think about for next time, and even though I'm recommending that we don't accept this, here are some things for you to take forward and make this paper better for a different journal. That's so important. Over the years, I know I've made some great relationships with reviewers, who have become board members like you Teresa. It's a wonderful cycle. Again, we could not do it without the reviewers that we have.

Dr. Laura Roberts (18:26):
I wanted to jump in to say, I think that reviewers do so much and give so much, but I've heard from many, many reviewers, and it was certainly true in my experience that I learned a lot from seeing a paper just evolve, like seeing the initial draft, seeing how the feedback helped the authors improve their work and what the ultimate paper was, so I hope from a developmental point of view, especially for early career people, it's a valuable learning endeavor, and I know there's a bit of an impostor syndrome. There's awkwardness when you're asked to review a paper and you kind of feel like who am I? But I have to say, often times the early-career people work so hard on their reviews and they're so generous to their colleagues that I always like to see a mix of more senior and more junior people or more early career people in the review process, because I think they really are so kind and so helpful and so diligent in their work.

Dr. Teresa Chan (19:22):
And I think that goes to a lot of the way that we think about making mistakes. Sometimes it's better to have written shotgun on someone else's mistakes before making your own. So it's kind of the reason why in, you know, medicine, we have morbidity mortality rounds, right? So that one mistake can be amplified and shared with a lot of people so that it becomes the story that keeps you from making that mistake yourself. Hopefully, I think reviews are a way to do that as an author for you to discern from fresh eyes, a new perspective, what are some common mistakes that other people make so that you can check yourself in your own practice. If you need a reason, that's more self-serving to get engaged in peer review. Some people need it. I do think it makes you a better scientist

overall, and that gives you a lens into the process.

Dr. Teresa Chan (20:06):
And for those people who want to someday be an editor in chief, I don't think it's possible for you not to do a good number of reviews and then editorial work before you can, you know, aspire to be the next Dr. Roberts, for instance, because I think that there is a very clear defined entry path as a reviewer. You can't just come out of nowhere and become an editor. You have to have done some of that stuff if only because it allows you to hone your craft. So you're better when you get there. So I think we're getting to the end of this. So thank you so much to both of you, but maybe do you have any final thoughts generally speaking about academic publishing, maybe a pearl or a tip that you wish everyone could know, not necessarily speaking on behalf of the journal, but just as someone who's been through the school of hard knocks on both ends of things, I'd love to hear what your final thought might be around academic publishing.

Dr. Laura Roberts (20:56):
Two pearls, I guess. One is to tell people to keep writing. You know, don't be discouraged. Every one of us has had papers rejected. We've had a poor fit. We've had an authorship dilemma or conflict with colleagues and just to keep at it because it really is the way that we kind of share and communicate with our colleagues. And then the second thing is editors are people, they're actually human beings and we might make mistakes. We try at the journal to always have at least two sets of a eyes on every paper so that we can watch out for our own blind spots or biases, or kind of double check our judgements on these things, but we are human beings. And so the good news about that is that if you really need to connect with us, we will respond. You know we care about the field.

Dr. Laura Roberts (21:43):
We all love the written word. We all love the work or we wouldn't be in these roles. And so, you know, you have to be patient with us on timing, but we're happy to engage with authors and reviewers in the field. The negative part of it, is that sometimes we might make mistakes. And for that, I just wanna emphasize that there are safeguards in our approach. I've already talked about the two sets of eyes, but also you can connect with the editorial staff about questions or even do appeals around decisions. And we don't view that negatively. We view that as people conscientiously trying to learn and advocate for their work, and you may be disappointed with the ultimate outcome, or you may be surprised in a pleasant sort of way, but I just wanna say that there are human beings in this process and we're here to really support the field and support you.

Dr. Mary Beth DeVilbiss (22:31):
You stole my answer. Thanks a lot. [laughter] No, having been on the staff for so long. It's been such a tremendous opportunity. I mean, I don't have a medical education background by training. I just kind of got folded into this family and learned along the way and developed all kinds of relationships. And I know our whole staff is the same way. And those of you who have worked with our team of staff editors, I'm sure you have stories of people going above and beyond to really make your paper shine before it comes out or providing a little extra information. If you can't find something on the website, you know, we're always here. We're always, you know we care so much, so we wanna make you look good and we wanna make the journal look good. And so any questions you have have, please don't hesitate to reach out.

Dr. Mary Beth DeVilbiss (23:23):
We are people and we will respond and we're missing the opportunity to get to meet people in

person at conferences these days. But we're trying to leverage the technology that we have and that we've been forced to become comfortable with during COVID. We're really trying to identify ways to be able to engage more with people who are, have questions or wanna learn more about the writing process, you know, just like Teresa is doing. So again, please continue to reach out. And if something's not clear, we'd love to hear about it and have the opportunity to improve and thanks for all your work.

Dr. Teresa Chan (24:00):
Yeah, I think it's something that people are putting work forward. It takes a lot of bravery and vulnerability to do that. It takes a lot of bravery and vulnerability to get rejected by, you know, journals left, front and center and still live to fight another day. So kudos to you for all taking the steps forward towards that and reach out to us. And when you're on the other side, as an editor reviewer, remember, authors are people too right, pay it forward, right? That kindness that you're gonna receive from others, if you can pay it forward. And that's how we make this cycle all get better rather than degrading. You can actually be an amplification and you can be someone who can help others become better. And then the whole field gets better in return. So thank you two you both for joining me for this podcast.

Dr. Laura Roberts (24:43):
Yeah. Thanks, Teresa.

Dr. Mary Beth DeVilbiss (24:45):
It was a pleasure. Thank you.

Dr. Teresa Chan (24:49):
Thank you so much for tuning in to the MacPFD Sparkle podcast. Just so you know, this podcast has been brought to you by the McMaster faculty of health sciences, and specifically the office of continuum professional development and the program for faculty development. If you're interested in finding out more of about what we can offer for faculty development, check out our website@www.macppfd.ca that's www.macppfd.ca Many of our events are actually web events that are free. Finally, I'd like to thank our sound engineer, Mr. Nick Hoskin, who has been an amazing asset to our team. Thanks so much, Nick, for all that you do. And also thank you to Scott Holmes for supplying us the music that you've been listening to. All right. So until next time, this is MacPFD Sparkle signing off.