Every year, millions of manuscripts are submitted to thousands of scientific journals looking for publication. It is estimated that more than one million new scientific articles are published every year by the most important scientific journals, and a significant number of these are related to medicine. Considering that journal acceptance rates are scarcely above 30%—and may be less than 5% for some—rejection letters are sent to millions of authors every year. The way we, as authors, handle rejection, can probably make a difference.

In their excellent article, Venketasubramanian and Hennerici suggest that on receipt of notification of rejection one may initially experience a paralyzing shock, followed by the five stages of the Kübler-Ross grief cycle (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance). I believe that anger usually takes over the scenario (at least according to my own experience). Once this initial anger is overcome, it is necessary to analyze the notification of rejection.

If the manuscript was rejected due to administrative reasons, it means we failed to comply with the instructions for authors. It is our own fault, without exception.

If the manuscript was rejected by the journal editors (with no feedback from reviewers), either our manuscript was really poor (it stinks!) or, most likely, we sent it to the wrong journal. Although editors are not infallible, they have the obligation to go through the hundreds of articles they receive to select only those they believe will be the most interesting to their readers. Many good articles are rejected by certain journals but gladly welcomed by others. It is essential for us to assess which publication will take interest in our work.

Lastly, if the manuscript was rejected following a peer review, we should take other factors into consideration. In general, our first impression is that peer reviewers did not understand our work. This is the case many times, but we should also bear in mind that the fact that they did not understand is exclusively our fault. Our obligation is to write an article that can be understood by the general public, not just by our team, who has spent their last 15 years focused on this specific matter. In addition, even with limitations, editors usually select reviewers among renowned professionals in each subject matter. Secondly, we usually feel like there is a conspiracy against us and that peer reviewers only want to harm us for the strangest reasons. We should bear in mind that editorial work is a burden on those who do it and they are usually driven by altruistic reasons. It is true that the peer review process is continuously discussed, but almost everyone agrees that, so far, it is the best option we have.

Once we contemplate that peer reviewers are not illiterate or hate us, we can then go over every item in their criticism and suggestions to correct our manuscript, either accepting their recommendations or backing up the elements that were not adequately stated in our first version.

If following rejection, we are allowed to send a new version, we will reply to each and every comment made by reviewers. If rejection is irreversible, we will submit our work to another journal, knowing that our article is now improved thanks to the work of editors and peer reviewers. It is not unusual that after three rejections, our article is accepted as is, with no amendments, and in record time by the fourth journal we had submitted it to. Our arrogance probably makes us believe that we have at last found a respectable group of scientists who appreciate our efforts and forget that our manuscript has been significantly improved by three previous reviews.

Fernando Ferrero, M.D.
Hospital General de Niños Pedro de Elizalde