

Skiing Chairman Hits the Ice But Still Makes Peer Review

By Bill Grigg



Andrew Robertson

If he hadn't have been on crutches, you might almost imagine Andrew Robertson toeing the ground, Gary Cooper-style, and telling SRA Nuria Assa-Munt, "Aw, 'twarnt nothing, ma'am."

Just a week and a half after the ski patrol carried him off a Colorado mountain, Dr. Robertson, 46, was hobbling bravely in to chair a study section's peer review of a program project. He had been showing his two daughters how to ski on Thanksgiving Day when he hit a patch of ice and fell. His ski failed to release and he suffered both a spinal fracture of his tibia and a second tibial fracture up near his knee.

At the CSR meeting, "Nuria was terrific. She helped me keep my leg elevated – it turned purple if I didn't – and couldn't have been nicer."

Still on crutches in January, but hoping to be off them soon, Dr. Robertson said he was lucky in that his daughters got him immediate care—"though they did see some humor in their instructor breaking his leg"—and because he was treated at a renowned clinic in Vail by Dr. William Sterett, orthopedist and head team physician for the U.S. Olympic Women's Alpine Ski Team.

"Interestingly enough," Dr. Robertson said, "she and the clinic put an emphasis on minimal intervention, so instead of a cast, I got a flexible brace that could bend at the knee. The brace was mostly to protect the leg from further injury." In early January he was permitted to remove the brace for good and to stand, slowly putting more and more pressure on the leg. He was scheduled for a sports test in early February—and was hoping to turn in his crutches as well.

CSR Director Toni Scarpa wrote Dr. Robertson and thanked him for his dedication, saying, "Peer review maintains its indispensable role because of the commitment, devotion and sacrifices of colleagues like you."

Dr. Robertson said he never considered skipping the meeting. "I enjoy participating in peer review, and I recognize the work that goes into preparing a meeting and the work that investigators put into their proposals, so it was a very easy decision."

He has served as a reviewer for nearly ten years and researched protein structure and function while a faculty member at the University of Iowa for much of that time. Recently, he became Chief Scientific Officer of the [Keystone Symposia](#), a nonprofit organization that develops symposia in biological fields throughout the world. He now lives near Keystone in Dillon, Colo.

“One of the perks at Keystone is being in the Rockies so you can ski,” Dr. Robertson says. “My daughters, I’m pleased to say, were undeterred by the accident. They were out skiing the rest of the long weekend.”

And, yes, he’ll be back skiing as soon as his medical team permits. “But nothing fancy,” he allows.

Andrew Robertson Perspectives on Peer Review

“My favorite part of reviewing is the learning that comes from reading and critiquing the proposals. In addition, grant reviewing provides an opportunity to get a feel for who is contributing to a field and to get acquainted with other scientists involved in the review process.”

What do you look for when you review an application?

I look for very interesting and clear questions and a well organized presentation regarding how these questions will be addressed by the investigator. The investigator usually needs to make the case for why their questions are interesting and important, why their approach is the best one and why other approaches are or are not appropriate. One of the most common shortcomings I see is not placing the proposed research in the context of the field with regard both to the history of the field and similar or complementary research in other labs.

Do you have any advice for new reviewers as to how to prepare for meetings?

I recommend reading the proposals in a systematic way. I try to get a big picture overview by doing a first read-through without stopping to make marks or notes. Next time through, I write an outline of the proposal, noting the questions or aims up front and then referring back to these questions as I outline the remainder of the proposal. In my outline, I include my questions, concerns, and favorable comments where appropriate. At this stage, I also do literature searches using key words and phrases in my outline. If I find relevant papers not cited in the proposal, I may make note of these in my outline. Once the outline is complete, I find it pretty easy to flesh it out into the narrative text needed for the review.

For me, a good quality review of a pretty good proposal in my own field takes at least one and a half days of full-time effort.

At the review meetings, which work pretty quickly, one should be prepared to make a succinct presentation. *Don’t read your entire review.* And articulate clear and helpful questions about other reviews.”

