



# Internet Journal of Medical Update

Journal home page: <http://www.akspublication.com/ijmu>

## Editorial

### Beyond the Numbers. What determines journal quality?

Sushil Dawka

Professor of Surgery, SSR Medical College, Mauritius

There exist numerous indices that are used to rate and rank academic journals in the form of various factors, metrics, and scores. Most of these are predicated on proxy statistics for their content such as frequency of citation of specific articles over varying periods, number of page hits and downloads, mentions on social media, etc. and they attempt to quantify what is at best an amorphous quality, recognizable from afar but lost among the details. What these much-disputed numbers really reflect is the status of the articles featured in those journals, and that is as it should be. After all, the heart of a journal is its content.

It is not my intention to further tease the controversies that beset these computations. I shall look at the softer, less defined, and arguably less important details that express the intrinsic quality of an academic journal as distinct from the quality or status of the articles it hosts. Over the next few paragraphs, I shall explore the attitude of a journal, its ethos and outlook, its positioning and self-image – qualities that defy measure and ranking – its soul, if you will.

While a journal cannot directly influence the quality of the manuscript submissions pool it gets to choose from, the editorial and review team has a choice as well as some degree of control over the final shape of the published article. Specifically, these are the features modifiable when an article is reverted for major (and sometimes minor) revision. These include ensuring that the article is scientifically relevant and rigorous, that study type-specific protocols and guidelines such as PRISMA or CONSORT have been followed, that trials are registered and have ethical clearance where needed, that journal guidelines with regard to structure, length and style have been followed, that references are authentic and in proper format, that the language and grammar is of academically acceptable standards, that ideas and reasoning are clearly expressed, that graphs, tables and figures are appropriate, that there is no redundancy between graphics and textual discussion, that study aims align with methods and conclusions, that the statistical methods used are appropriate and meaningful, and that there is no plagiarism.

These rules do not account for the indefinable attribute that some call 'bedtime readability', the ability of a journal to grab and hold interest in topics that the reader was not particularly looking for, and to tempt one to browse through content outside one's area of professional interest. This would be different for print issues and online publications. For a journal in hand, the urge to flip through pages could be driven by a complementary blend of interesting articles, supported by good paper and print quality, heft, binding etc. For an online journal this would include accessibility, paywalls, log-in (in)convenience, as well as webpage aesthetics, navigability, screen scalability and browser-platform independence. Other features that could affect the overall impression are the obtrusiveness and/or aptness of advertisements, usability of indexes and/or search tools, issue-wise article listings, etc. In addition, editorial content, newsletters, conference reports and proceedings, book and product reviews, etc. can add or detract to the journal's inherent interest.

These aspects of journal quality would be readily appreciated by a reader, but an academic periodical has a deeper and more enduring relationship with its contributors. An aspiring or potential author is necessarily a more discerning judge of quality than a reader. Because a reader often consults a journal with a particular article or topic in mind, he or she may not necessarily be aware of (or care about) the peripheral features beyond the worth of the article. An author, on the other hand, will critically evaluate the journal on a number of criteria before deciding on submission.

One generally unchallenged though controversial measure of a journal's quality is the reputation of the publisher. There are big-name publication houses that claim literally thousands of journals in their stables across all fields of human knowledge, in both print and online versions. There are also online journal mills where each of a score or more journals on various disciplines is virtually represented by one browser tab. There are journals affiliated to professional societies, academic institutions or produced by university presses. Some upstart journals are avatars of defunct

journals, at times reputed classics that could not sustain themselves, now resurrected to claim historical lineage by virtue of elderly volume numbers. Another feature is the nominal country of origin; an “American” or “British” journal would require national roots (however tenuous) whereas an “International” or “World” journal would not. Some of the best journals have arisen out of a national professional association and bear that country’s demonym; unfortunately, this may be seen as an indicator of insularity despite their authors and readership being global.

Again, there are journals that mimic reputed journals in name and logo, luring unsuspecting authors into the web of predatory publishing.

A good journal should shine with honest clarity. The scope and aims of the journal should be delineated to help authors decide on submission. The editorial team should be listed on the website with institutional affiliations that can be cross-checked for authenticity. Hallmarks of a transparent and smooth editorial process include clear and unambiguous submission guidelines, reasonable and realistic editorial requirements, a prompt acknowledgement on first submission, a fair and reasonably rapid screening and subsequent suitably blinded peer review, a justified decision (including, if needed, a polite and clearly explained rejection incorporating reviewers’ comments and suggestions), stated and reasonable acceptance rates and turnaround times and, ultimately, rapid online and print publication. There should be total transparency with regard to article processing charges, if any, and the choice between toll access and open access for a hybrid journal should be clearly and avowedly separate from the editorial process. This is necessary to counteract the impression that paying an APC somehow lowers thresholds (unless, as in the case of predatory journals, it does).

A good journal should be interactive. Responses to articles in the form of letters to the editor should

make it to the very next issue. Queries related to submission and content should be answered promptly and usefully. The journal should have an unflinching policy against plagiarism on submission, and a protocol to deal with post-publication detection of plagiarism. A formally stated retraction of an article on grounds of duplicity is a marker of a journal’s high and uncompromising standards, rather than an embarrassment.

As a player for both teams, I submit that the most discerning judges of intrinsic journal quality, beyond the numbers, are the authors who choose to submit their manuscripts for consideration. We all know or empathise with the uncertainty and trepidation that surrounds the process of publishing one’s cherished research. The trauma of manuscript submission is one aspect of a journal’s function that remains a concealed interaction between authors and editors. If I had to single out one operational process as a gauge of journal quality, I would choose this: how the journal handles articles destined for rejection. Even the most politely worded, gently apologetic rejection is, at best, a blunt platitudinous refusal. Only, if framed in a personalized, polite and timely letter incorporating reviewers’ comments that are not merely insightful and constructive but prove that the article has been accorded a respectfully fair degree of diligent consideration, will the blow be softened.

Authors are optimistic, realistic and elastic; it would truly be a matter of pride for a journal if a rejected author targeted the same journal for his or her next submission. Therefore, to paraphrase the Scots poet Robert Burns, every journal should aim ‘*to see ourselves as authors see us*’. It would indeed ‘*from many a blunder free us*’.

**Sushil Dawka**  
**Quality Control Editor**  
**Email: [sushil.dawka@gmail.com](mailto:sushil.dawka@gmail.com)**