

The predicament of impact factor publications and ethical values

Pages with reference to book, From 4 To 5

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The year 1955 witnessed the founding of the concept that Eugene Garfield called 'The Impact Factor'.¹ Over the years the phenomenon evolved and in the 1960s Sher and Garfield created a journal to identify other journals for the Science Citation Index.¹ The vast majority of researchers and institutes judge a journal solely by its impact factor. A journal with a high impact factor is considered more prestigious and authors prefer to submit their research to such selected publications. Librarians look out for high impact factor journals for their subscription list.

This point of view should not be accepted blindly. Garfield shared similar views in his 2005 speech at the International Congress on Peer Review and Biomedical Publication, Chicago.² He concluded his talk by quoting the description given by Hoeffel for Impact Factor in a brief but coherent manner:

"Impact Factor is not a perfect tool to measure the quality of articles but there is nothing better and it has the advantage of already being in existence and is, therefore, a good technique for scientific evaluation. Experience has shown that in each specialty the best journals are those in which it is most difficult to have an article accepted, and these are the journals that have a high impact factor."³

"Most of these journals existed long before the impact factor was devised. The use of impact factor as a measure of quality is widespread because it fits well with the opinion we have in each field of the best journals in our specialty."³

Impact factor depends on the number of citations from a given journal. At times there can be difficulties in accessing articles from a journal. This applies especially to scientific publications that may not be a business concern. Such journals may contain articles which truly add to the bank of knowledge. They are either not indexed or are in the process of indexation. Sometimes they are not electronically available for online searching.

The view of the authors should also be considered here. Not being easily accessible and non-indexation of a journal forces the promotion driven researchers not to submit their writings to such journals. It is also well known that articles from highly specialized journals or publications with a large number of review articles get more citations. But the role of journals providing readers with subjects from diverse biomedical fields but having fewer citations also becomes evident. These journals prove to be helpful to authors in finding good references.

Journal of Pakistan Medical Association (JPMA) has been awarded the Impact Factor of 0.409 by JCR for the year 2012.^{4,5} There are only three biomedical journals with an impact factor in Pakistan and JPMA has the privilege of leading them all. This does not mean that the other two journals, Journal of College of Physicians and Surgeons Pakistan and Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences have a lesser worth. They are in fact equally good and publish a large number of original research articles.

There are other important aspects of publication which need consideration.

The level of ethics observed in a journal is more important than the impact factor. All editors are obliged to check the submitted manuscripts for plagiarism. Authors' contributions need to be clearly stated. Guest and ghost authors should be screened out. If we want to improve the standard of medical research, duplicate submissions and redundant publications needs to be addressed strictly globally by all editors. Authors found involved in data tampering should be penalized.

These questions are more relevant for the low resource countries with numerous barriers to progress. Generally poor command on the language along with lack of good mentors and the necessity to publish coerces the candidate to adopt unethical measures. The tussle between doing good research and having the desire to publish in a high impact factor journal, becomes a great stressor for the author. It becomes

a question of prestige.

References

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