

Staying Relevant

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In this issue, we have an article on 'Publication productivity and citation analysis of the Medical Journal of Malaysia' by Sanni and Zainab.¹ Their paper is a glimpse into the world of medical publishing. It is not primarily an audit of the MJM. It is an exercise in bibliometrics. It just happens to use the MJM as an available subject. It uses the MJM as a test case for Lotka's law and Bradford's law and to study the versatility of *Google Scholar*. It finds that the MJM does follow the norms of the age of articles cited and has a core group of about 40 journals which are cited about 30% of the time. What is also amazing is that during the five year study period over 1,500 different publication sources are cited in the 580 articles published.

Corporations pay large sums of money to have experts audit and analyse their working systems in order to achieve greater efficiency and to face the challenges of the future. In the competitive business world only the leanest and best adapted excel. Medical journals also face similar challenges. It is not so much there is a threat to survival. In fact, in the world today, there is an unnecessary proliferation of medical journals. There are more than enough medical and para-medical workers who have to demonstrate their academic credentials through publication to supply periodicals with articles to publish regularly. The question then becomes how does a journal gain that edge in attracting quality submissions and so become a publication that draws a readership? The answer of course is to build on reliability, consistency and a rigorous peer-review base. But how does one measure success?

The academic world has worked out the tools to answer that question. Readership is hard to quantify, but what is thought more important and measurable is citation. A significant article, will be referred to more often by subsequent writers working in the field. To that end we have several tools to measure a citation index, none more well known than the ISI derived Impact Factor.

The MJM does not have an official ISI impact factor. We are therefore grateful to have been subjected to this bibliometric exercise for free. Unlike the corporate world, our reviewers and editors work for free and the MJM is pleased to likewise get some benefit for free.

On the audit side of the information the study by Sanni and Zainab have derived, it is heartening to note that 76.8% of the articles published in the MJM are cited at least once in the 5 years studied. Self citation is surprisingly low – only 2.5% - happening only in 173 instances. This could be that because the scope of the MJM is wide, authors who write for the MJM

may not find anything previously published in their field in the MJM. It is also gratifying to see that MJM articles are cited by authors from 76 different countries. Surprisingly, more authors in China cite papers in the MJM than our own Malaysian authors. The reason for this is that China is so much larger and increasing in its academic output. On the other hand, it might be Malaysian authors do not do an adequate literature search and are not aware of our Malaysian data. Better accessibility to Malaysian healthcare literature is likely to improve with the comprehensive and continuously updated collections of Malaysian scholarly journals, conference proceedings, dissertations, theses and books. Publicly funded initiatives such as MyAIS (<http://myais.fsktm.um.edu.my/>) and MyCITE (<http://bakkdev.um.edu.my/mycite/mccs/>) are long overdue. When these services are publicly searchable via popular web browsers (hopefully with free full text linkage), not only will the visibility of scientific Malaysian work improve but the "impact factor" of our work will rise as well.

It is also revealing that the MJM has a low rate of repeat publication by authors. Lotka contends that about 60% of all contributors make only a single contribution. For the MJM it was found that, a much higher percent, 76%, of authors publish only once in the five years studied. Table VI in the paper¹ gives us the roll of honour of the most frequently published authors in the MJM.

Even though we do not have an ISI impact factor and cannot claim to be a high impact journal, what is more important for the MJM is to fill our niche². Even as I appreciate the data Sanni and Zainab have provided, I disagree with their recommendation to take steps to encourage foreign contributors. Such steps may indeed increase our ISI impact factor, which I am thankful they have calculated for us. It ranges from 0.378 to 0.616. I am aware that many would advocate the cause of making the MJM an 'international journal'. I am not entirely for it. For one thing, as Editor-in-chief, I now know that in our current state our reviewers will not be able to cope with a flood of foreign papers.

In addition, a journal such as one about 'Tropical Medicine' or even about 'Left Ear Diseases' might seek to be international and if possible become a leader in the field. But if a journal like the Medical Journal of Malaysia becomes successful internationally such that in the end only 10% of its articles are from Malaysia, I think the MJM loses its essence. Becoming international may gain the MJM a higher Impact Factor but it would no longer be Malaysian. Each journal must know its niche.

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Editorial

Nevertheless, I must say the MJM will not close the door to submissions from other countries. Cross border exchange of knowledge is always refreshing and a different perspective is enlightening. However, currently we cannot encourage this too much because our review process and publication schedule are limited resources. We will however welcome all submissions and submit them to the same rigorous review process.

Disclaimer: The Medical Journal of Malaysia has no relationship with the authors and the paper was submitted for review in the normal process. We would like however to express of thanks to the authors here. I would also like to thank Dr CL Teng for input in the preparation of this editorial

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