

7-22-2019

# Small But Mighty: Letters-to-the-Editor Published on the Zika Virus, 1952 - 2018

Frances A. Delwiche

*University of Vermont*, [fdelwich@uvm.edu](mailto:fdelwich@uvm.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/libfacpub>

 Part of the [Health Sciences and Medical Librarianship Commons](#), [Infectious Disease Commons](#), [Scholarly Communication Commons](#), and the [Scholarly Publishing Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Delwiche, Frances A., "Small But Mighty: Letters-to-the-Editor Published on the Zika Virus, 1952 - 2018" (2019). *University Libraries Faculty and Staff Publications*. 74.

<https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/libfacpub/74>

This Poster is brought to you for free and open access by the University Libraries at ScholarWorks @ UVM. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Libraries Faculty and Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UVM. For more information, please contact [donna.omalley@uvm.edu](mailto:donna.omalley@uvm.edu).

# Small but Mighty: Letters-to-the-Editor Published on the Zika Virus between 1952 and 2018

Frances A. Delwiche, MLIS, Dana Medical Library, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT, USA

## Background and Objective

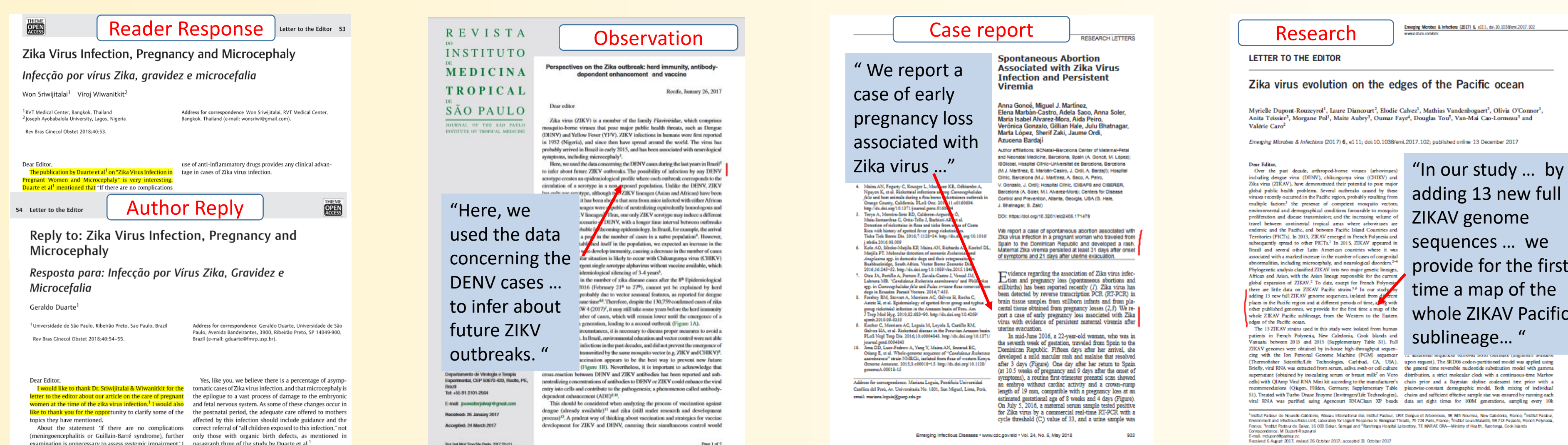
Letters-to-the-Editor are an overlooked and undervalued publication type, known primarily as a means through which readers formally respond to a publication in a scholarly journal. Letters-to-the-Editor may also be used to disseminate field observations, clinical findings, and the results of research projects.

Most Letters-to-the-Editor fall into one of five major categories:

- **Reader Response** to an article published in a scholarly journal
- **Reply** by the author of the original article, addressing the points raised by the response Letter.
- **Observation** written to raise awareness of potentially important phenomena
- **Case Report** highlights the unique characteristics of one or more specific patient(s)
- **Research** conveys results of small research studies or preliminary data

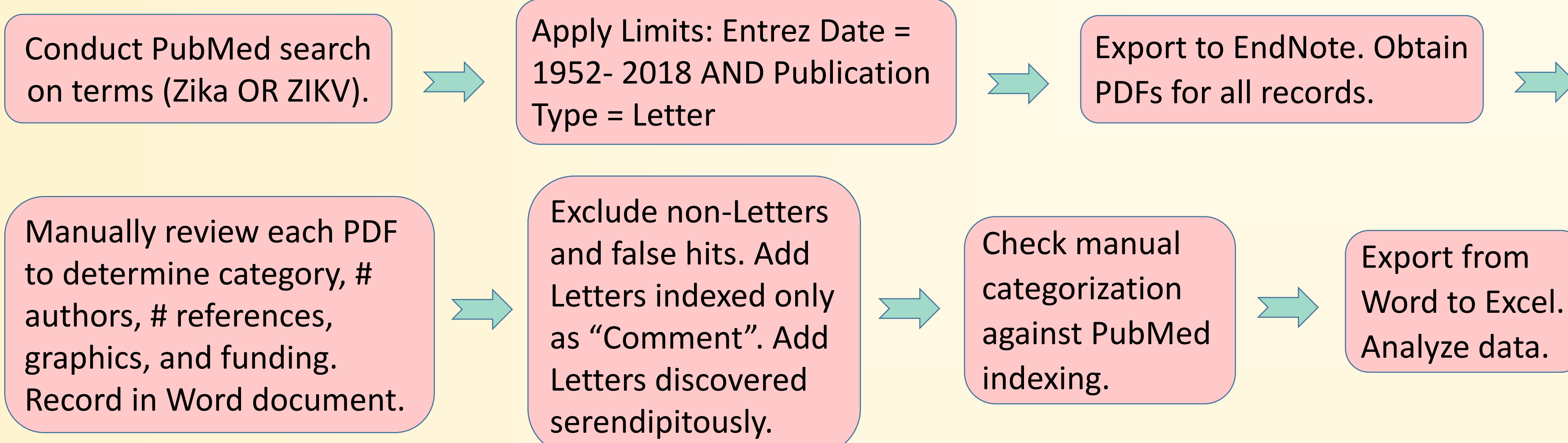


Man Writing a Letter (1667-1668), Oil on canvas, Gabriel Metsu.



The objective of this study was to conduct a bibliometric analysis of all Letters-to-the-Editor written about the Zika Virus between 1952 and 2018, encompassing the largest Zika Virus epidemic to date which occurred in the Americas in 2015-2016. Study parameters included the total number of Letters published, date range, category of Letter, number of authors, number of references, use of graphics, and funding.

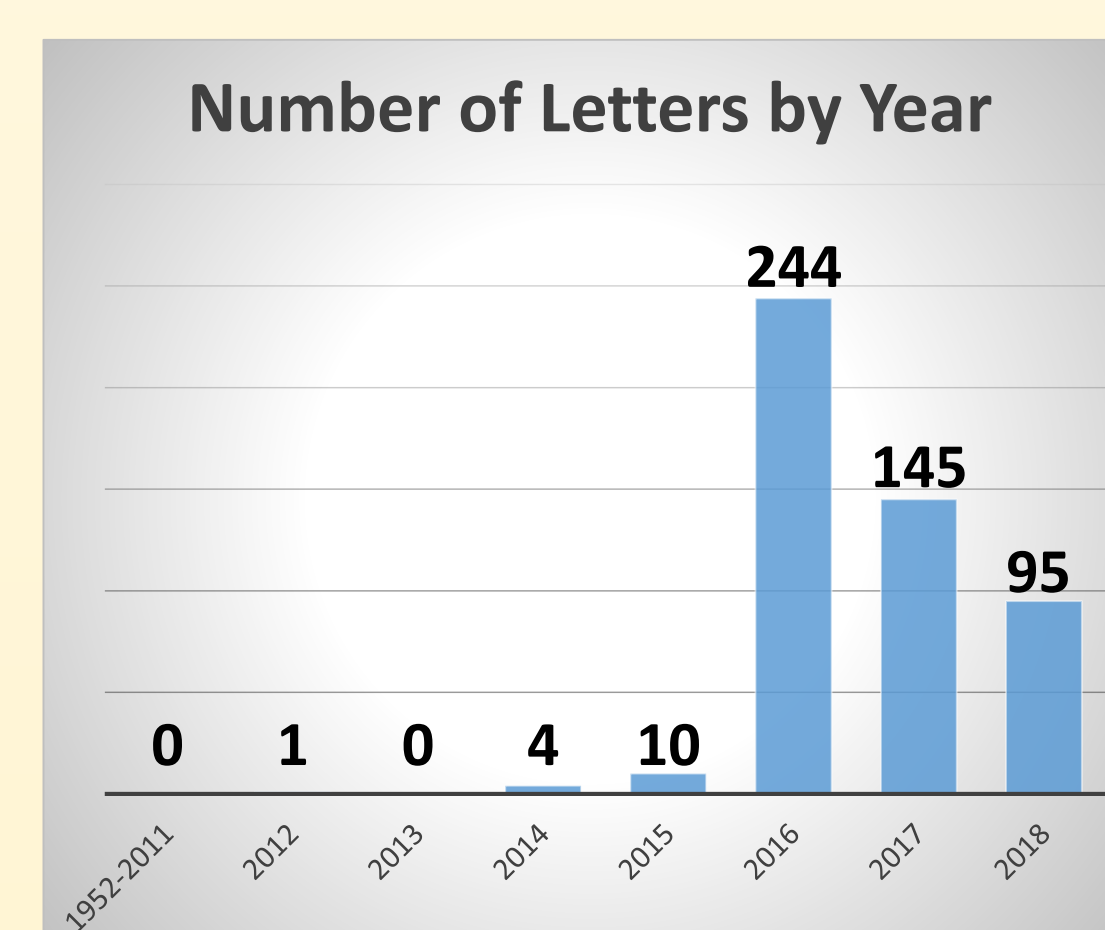
## Methods



## Results

- PubMed search for Letters dated 1952-2017 conducted Oct 17, 2018 → 375 Letters
- PubMed search for 2018 Letters conducted Jan 03, 2019 → 81 Letters
- Follow-up search for additional 2018 Letters conducted July 15, 2019 → 11 Letters
- Additions = 26 Letters indexed as Comment but not indexed as Letter, and 13 Letters discovered serendipitously
- Exclusions = 2 duplicates and 5 non-Letters
- Total Letters in final set = 499.

Only fifteen Letters were written in the first 64 years following publication in 1952 of the seminal article describing the Zika Virus. As the 2015-2016 epidemic in the Americas unfolded, the number of Letters exploded to 244 in 2016, then dropped by 41% to 145 in 2017, and in 2018 diminished by another 34% to 95.



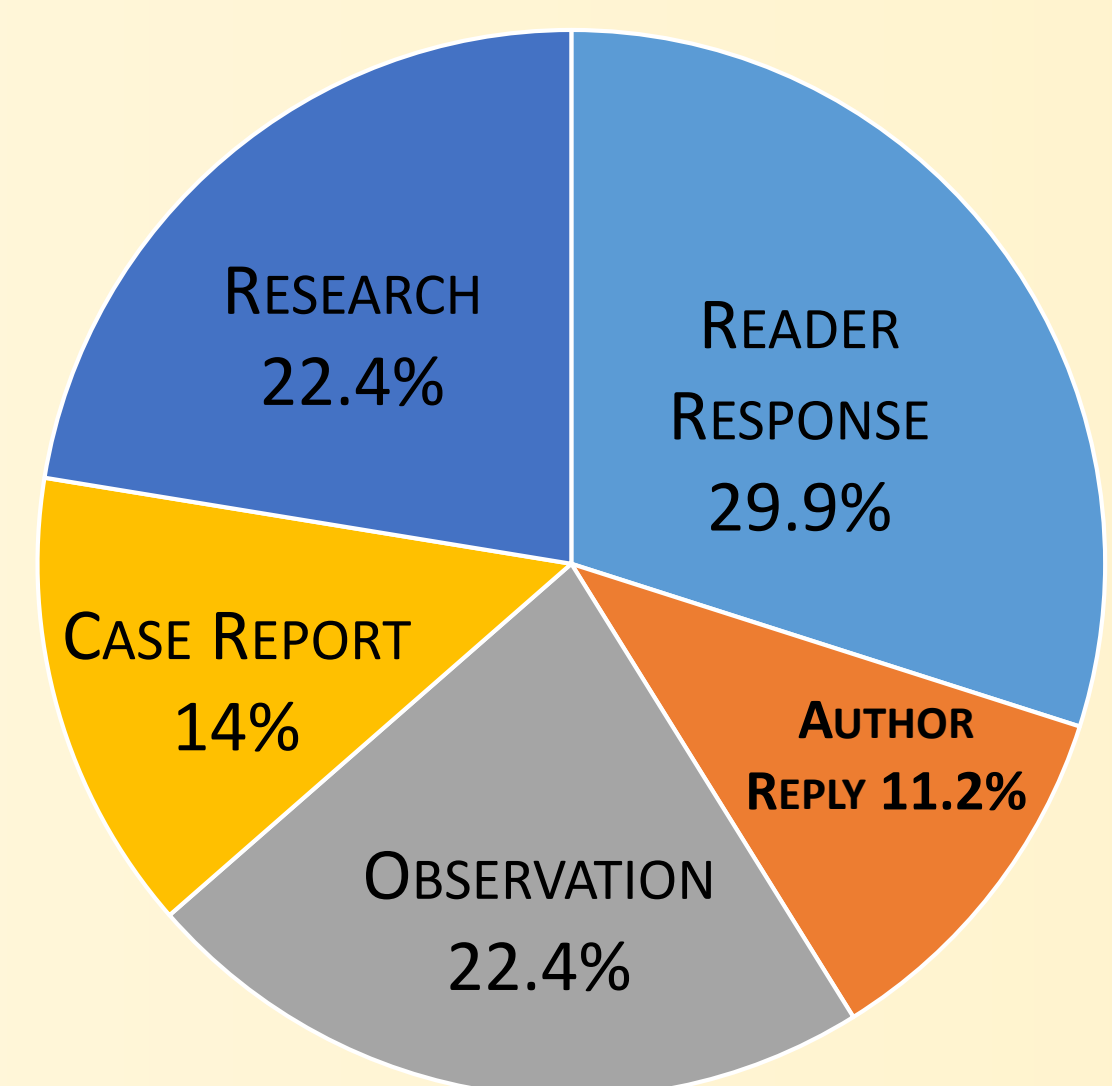
## Results

Prior to the 2015-2016 Zika Virus epidemic, very few Reader Responses and/or Author Replies were published. As the epidemic evolved, the absolute number of Letters exploded, and the percent of Reader Responses increased from 6.7% pre-2016 to 36.6% in 2017. In 2016, at the height of the epidemic, 65.2% of the Letters published were *other than* Reader Responses or Replies, including 66 Observations, 42 Case Reports, and 51 Research.

Category	1952-2015	2016	2017	2018	TOTAL
Response	1 (6.7%)	62 (25.4%)	53 (36.6%)	33 (34.7%)	149 (29.9%)
Reply	1 (6.7%)	23 (9.4%)	17 (11.7%)	15 (15.8%)	56 (11.2%)
Observation	4 (26.7%)	66 (27.1%)	34 (23.4%)	8 (8.4%)	112 (22.4%)
Case Report	5 (33.3%)	42 (17.2%)	12 (8.3%)	11 (11.6%)	70 (14.0%)
Research	4 (26.7%)	51 (20.9%)	29 (20.0%)	28 (29.5%)	112 (22.4%)
TOTAL	15 (100%)	244 (100%)	145 (100%)	95 (100%)	499 (99.9%*)

\* Total less than 100.0% due to rounding

Categories of Letters



Of the 499 Letters in the study:

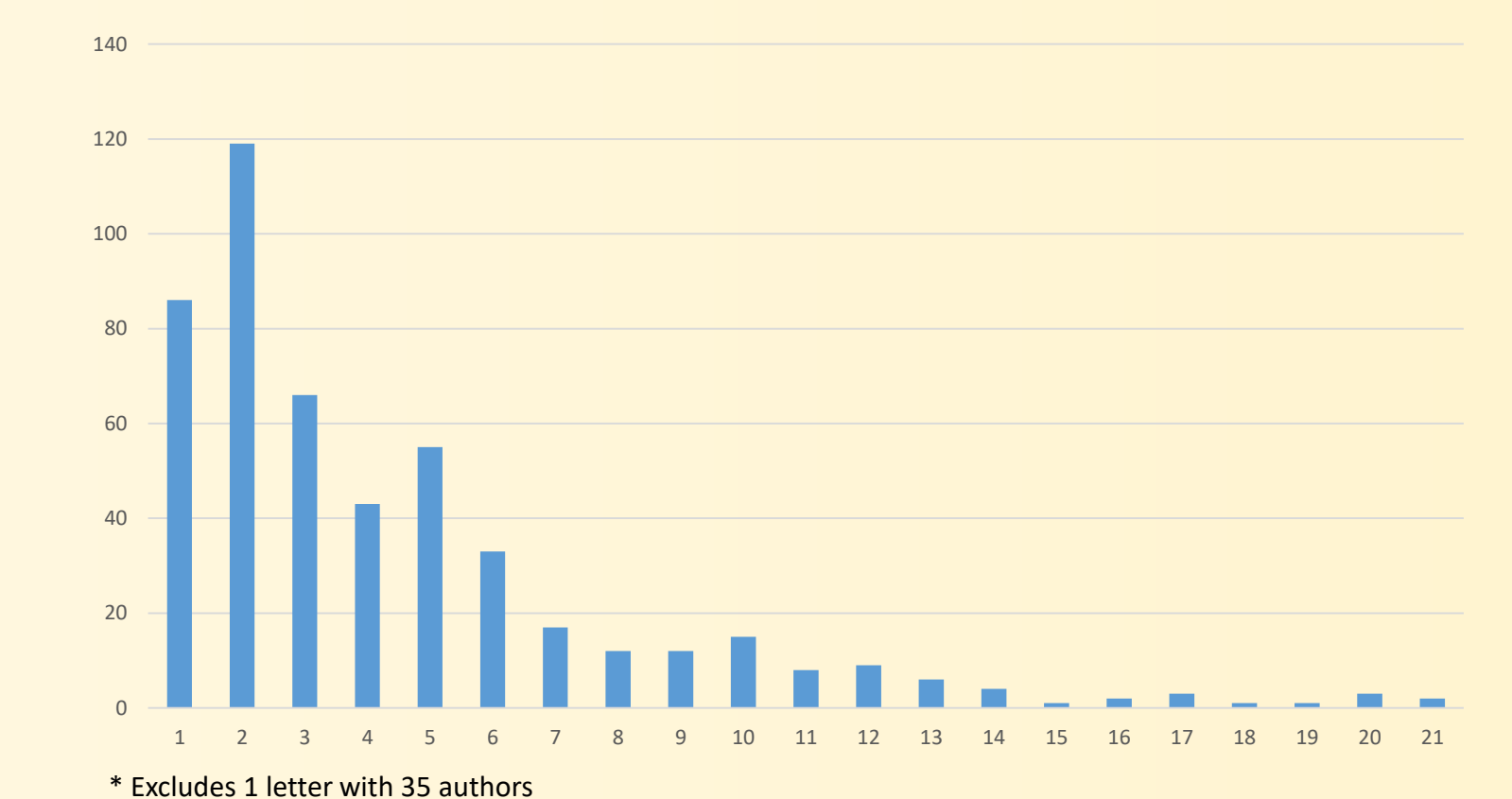
- Response + Reply = 41.1%
- Observation + Case Report + Research = 58.9%

Writing a Letter-to-the-Editor is often a group endeavor. In this study, the number of authors ranged from 1 to 35, with 82.8% written by more than one author.

### Number of Authors

1-5 authors:	369 (74.0%)
• 1 author:	86 (17.2%)
• 2 authors:	119 (23.8%)
6-10 authors:	89 (17.8%)
11-15 authors:	28 (5.6%)
16-20 authors:	10 (2.0%)
> 20 authors:	3 (0.6%)

Number of Authors \*



\* Excludes 1 letter with 35 authors

### Number of References

0	8 (1.6%)
1-5	262 (52.5%)
6-10	172 (34.5%)
11-15	38 (7.6%)
16-20	7 (1.4%)
21-25	3 (0.6%)
26-30	1 (0.2%)
> 30	8 (1.6%)

In this study, the number of references ranged from 0 to 63, with 442 of the 499 Letters (87.0%) citing from 1 - 10 references. Eight Letters cited > 30 references. Many journals impose a limit on the number of references permitted for Letters, often 5 or 10. Thus, the most frequently occurring number of references was 5 with 114 Letters (22.8%), and 51 Letters (10.2%) cited 10 references.

192 Letters (38.5%) included graphics, and 77 Letters (15.4%) reported support from internal or external funding. Additional research is required to establish an association between the number of authors, number of references, use of graphics, or funding support and the quality, value and impact of a Letter.

## Limitations

A number of limitations occurred as a result of the study's methodology:

- The study was conducted using data from only one database (PubMed).
- The search strategy did not pick up all Letters, particularly in the case of Author Replies.
- Letters were sometimes assigned incorrect MeSH headings. Assignment of MeSH headings often delayed.
- Overlap between the different types of Letters sometimes made categorization difficult.

An additional limitation of the study stems from the nature of Letters-to-the-Editor as a publication type. An advantage to publishing information in a Letter-to-the-Editor is that the publication time is reduced by expediting or bypassing the peer-review process, enabling the information to be disseminated more quickly. However, this shortened publication cycle may result in unexpected anomalies.

For example, relatively few authors published more than one Letter as lead or sole author. Of 341 unique lead authors, only 38 (11.1%) were lead author on more than one Letter. Of these, 24 (7.0%) were lead author on 2 Letters; 6 (1.8%) were lead author on 3 Letters; and 6 (1.8%) were lead author on 5-10 Letters.

Notably, one author was sole author on 36 Letters, and a second author was lead author on 49 Letters, all of which were co-authored by the first author. In all, the first author wrote or co-wrote 104 Letters, for 20.8% of the total. Of these, 78 (75.0%) were Responses, 25 (24.0%) were Observations, and 1 (1.0%) was Research.

## Conclusion

In this study, well over half the Letters-to-the-Editor published on the Zika Virus from 1952-2018 were categorized as Observations, Case Reports, or Research. The Letters were usually written by more than one author, almost always included references, often contained graphics, and frequently had funding support. These findings suggest that Letters-to-the-Editor may serve as a rich source of information. However, it also demonstrates that unique characteristics of this publication type may make it particularly susceptible to unexpected anomalies.