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SAMJ – Africa’s top open access medical journal

A revolution is taking place in the world of scientific publishing. In the traditional model of publishing scientific articles, the author raised money to conduct the research project, then submitted the paper to a scientific journal for consideration for publication; if the manuscript survived the brutal peer review process, the author would be required to assign copyright to the publisher and pay ‘page charges’ for publication of the article. Finally, the author (as reader) had to pay a subscription fee to the publisher of the journal in order to have access to his or her published paper! Authors, members of the public and funders of research are understandably in revolt against this apparent exploitation of authors and readers by traditional publishers who extract substantial profits from the production of scientific knowledge through the efforts and investments of others. This unfavourable situation has led to the rise of the ‘open access’ movement in scientific publishing.¹

In open access publishing, articles are made immediately and freely available to readers on the Internet, with no restrictions on distribution, copying, printing or legitimate use.¹ Instead of readers being charged for access to the articles, the authors of accepted research articles pay a publication fee to cover the costs of peer review, editorial oversight, and production.¹ The leading publishers of open access journals and articles are BioMed Central (<http://www.biomedcentral.com/>), the Public Library of Science (<http://www.plos.org/>), and PubMed Central (<http://www.pubmedcentral.gov/>). Open access journals are gaining in popularity among authors because of rapid processing of articles, immediate and wide availability of their work to readers, and the rising impact of open access publications. Major funding agencies such as the National Institutes of Health (USA) and Wellcome Trust (UK) have announced willingness to pay for open access publishing, the cost of which averages less than 1% of the cost of research itself – a small price to pay to ensure wide dissemination of results of research.¹

The winds of change are also sweeping through the *South African Medical Journal* and its publisher, the Health and Medical Publishing Group. The first step, taken several years ago, was to drop the page charge costs to authors. More recently, the full text of articles published in the *Journal* has become available on MEDLINE immediately on publication, free of charge to all readers. The *SAMJ*’s modernisation into a ‘free to publish’ and ‘free access’ publication has already had a noticeable impact on the quality, quantity, and international reach of papers submitted for publication. By finding other innovative ways of funding the *Journal* for the public good, the publishers of the *SAMJ* have set a new standard in the field of open access publishing.

The author- and reader-friendly reforms that have taken place over the past few years are also already having a favourable and measurable effect on the international standing of the *Journal*. The *SAMJ*’s impact factor has been rising continuously over the past five years (Fig. 1).² The impact factor, which refers to the ratio of the number of citations in one year to the number of articles published in the previous two years, is one of the measures of quality (albeit imperfect) generally used to rank scientific journals in different fields of science (i.e. the ‘league table’ of scientific journals). The *SAMJ* is ranked number 1 among peer-reviewed medical journals in Africa, number 2 among comparable journals from Australasia (*Medical Journal of Australia* – impact factor 2, and *New Zealand Medical Journal* – impact factor 0.554), and number 44 among the 103 journals grouped in the ISI Medicine, General and Internal list.³ Most of the recently established open access journals that compete with the *SAMJ* for articles are as yet not listed on ISI (who publish impact factors).

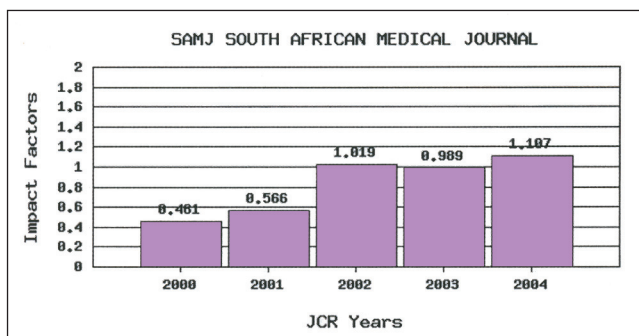


Fig. 1. The impact factor of the South African Medical Journal has risen by 140% over 5 years.

The *SAMJ* has established itself as a quality journal that should be considered as the first port of call for authors who need to have their quality work published immediately and widely for the benefit of society. We encourage the publication of original clinical and population based studies covering the forefront of health sciences. We also support the publication of high-quality systematic reviews that fall within the scope of the journal.

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1. Eisen MB, Brown PO, Varmus HE. *PLoS Medicine* – a medical journal for the internet age. *PLoS Med* 2004; 1: e31.
2. <http://isi9.isiknowledge.com/portal.cgi> (last accessed 13 October 2005).