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Dermatology Journals and the Impact Factor

“There are four types of ignorance:

1. Things which you know and think you know.
2. Things which you know but think you do not know.
3. Things which you do not know and think you do not know.
and
4. Things that you do not know but think you know.
Beware the last one!”

- Socrates (470-399 BCE)

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A half century ago, journals were usually printed with hot type, set either by a Mergenthaler Linotype or Harris Intertype. The fifth and final edition of the *Index-Catalogue of the Library of the Surgeon-General's Office* had been published. The number of dermatology journals was less than 100¹, and the Library of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia subscribed to all but two. Even then, librarians and some readers recognized that the annual increase in scientific information had come to exceed anything with which a medical librarian might cope.

The noted informatics authority, Eugene Garfield (1925-2017), while working at the Johns Hopkins Medical Library, decided to assist medical librarians in selecting the publications to which they should subscribe. Not only at issue was the expense of subscribing and binding the periodicals, but there was also the physical space for shelving them. This was the birth of the Science Citation Index (SCI), the Impact Factor (IF), and the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) in Philadelphia².

Its Purpose

The role of the SCI has expanded over the years. Libraries may still continue to select journals on the basis of their IF, with many institutions subscribing to their periodicals digitally or by group selection from the publishers' packages. What was never anticipated, however, is the importance given to the IF, not only by libraries, but also by readers and even academia. Unfortunately, this has produced some untoward and even bizarre results.

The Journal Impact Factor and Its Consequences

How is the IF determined? The IF ratings are primarily formulated based on how many citations are made of a paper published in that journal and the IF in turn of each of those papers that cite that paper and of the journals in which those papers appear, performed by staff at the ISI²⁻⁷. The process is not perfect, and unintended consequences creep in places⁷, but there are more important issues to be considered.

Some journals enjoy exceedingly high impact factors, although their readability by the average physician is questionable. This is demonstrated by a publication by one of us (WCL) who in 1969 described a method for synchronization of cultured cells all into a single phase of the cell cycle⁸. The method has become widely used, is cited in numerous papers, and has earned such a high IF that it has actually been cited specifically as a high impact factor paper by the ISI. While this is flattering, it is just a methods paper and is not considered by WCL to be among his most important contributions.

Periodicals often wish to maintain or advance their reputation. As a result, not a few have discarded the case report, which, in the case of dermatology, is disappointing, as these papers are often instrumental in advancing knowledge of the discipline. Another "trick of the trade" is to relegate some contributions to on-line only status. Yet, another is to initiate a separate publication under the mantra of the main journal. As perspicaciously noted by David Pendlebury of the ISI, "Journal impact factors are frequently misused to assess the influence of individual papers and authors, but such uses were never intended"⁵.

To make matters worse, European universities sometimes base promotions on how high are the impact factors of the journals in which the candidate has published. The higher the publications' IFs the more likely the young physician will advance in his or her academic community³⁻⁵.

As noted by C. Northcote Parkinson (1909-1993), a British naval historian, anything given a numerical value tends to be awarded outsized importance in making decisions, further exacerbating this issue⁹. The problem is made even worse by the fact that few of us really understand, take the time, or extend the effort needed to comprehend, the real meaning of the IF, its definition is never clearly stated, making it all the more powerful¹⁰. There should be better ways to determine merit among the endeavors of ourselves and our peer and to determine who among us will be named "the Sweetheart of Sigma Chi."

What Can be Done to Rectify the Problem?

An author may choose to ignore the IF of a journal and submit his or her work to a publication best suited for the presentation. Yes, there is a snob appeal to publishing in a high IF journal. If the periodical is listed in PubMed and/or PubMed Central, however, as are most peer reviewed journals, half the battle for recognition is already won.

The other 50% could perhaps be remedied by creating a specialty impact factor (the Dermatology Impact Factor) based solely on contributions published in, and cited in, dermatology related journals. Other specialties and subspecialties of medicine may find it useful to do something similar. This might not be a perfect solution, but maybe there is more than one way to become "The Sweetheart of Sigma Chi."

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