Correspondence

Online visibility and availability of journals can attract authors and readers

Sir,

I read the letter by John and the accompanying editorial in the May issue of IJMR exploring the reasons behind the choice of journal for publishing research by Indian scientists with great interest\(^1\)\(^2\). Impact factors of journals are no doubt a major deciding factor. In the UK, for instance, they are an important aspect of the research assessment exercise (RAE) that universities and colleges are subjected to every four to five years. The RAE provides quality ratings for research across all disciplines according to how much of the work is judged to reach national or international levels of excellence; this forms the basis for the distribution of public funds, amounting to around £5 billion, for research purposes by the higher education funding bodies\(^3\). However, this risks discouraging researchers from pursuing and/or publishing low-impact work that may nevertheless be of considerable importance in advancing the state of the knowledge. There are other problems with using impact factors to assess quality. The impact factor of a journal is a measure of its average citation rate and not the quality of an individual’s work. Impact factors could be plumped up by a citation bias towards heavily marketed journals. Moreover, citations do not always reflect high quality; on the contrary, a shoddy piece of work is likely to attract many criticisms and refutations. And the impact factors of journals in one field are not directly comparable with those in a different field. Nevertheless, for lack of a better measure of the quality of the work, impact factors will remain an important deciding factor in the choice of journal.

What, then, can be done to make a journal more attractive to readers and prospective authors? Greater visibility and ease of access. In the age of the Internet, this is easily achieved by even cash-starved society journals. With its excellent information technology infrastructure, India could and should lead the way in electronic publishing alongside more traditional models of publication. One study has shown that articles with free online access receive 336% more citations than offline articles published in the same venue\(^4\). However, it is important for online material to be easily locatable. The major Medline-indexed Indian medical publications now have a strong online presence but few exploit all the advantages of Internet connectivity. For instance, most do not provide full text access links from PubMed (the web-based version of Medline). Many also suffer from a considerable delay from publication to archiving on indexing databases, which may in turn affect the immediacy index of the journal—a measure of how soon articles get cited. Ironing out these problems would no doubt attract greater international readership. Enabling secure online submission and rapid editorial turn over times may also encourage submissions from within the country and also from abroad. Scientific publishing, after all, is a unifying force that cuts across cultural and geographical barriers; this has never been truer than in today’s global village.

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References