

Letters to the Editor

Implications of changes in the impact factors of psychiatric journals

Dear Editor:

Good psychiatric research always was international but the trends in global technology have made it much more so. It is therefore no longer appropriate for journals to be parochial in their choice of publications. This policy has clearly been followed by *Epidemiologia e Psichiatria Sociale* in its position as a newly cited journal and already it has an international spread in its choice of articles. It will also be hoping for a high impact factor. Although there are considerable criticisms of the impact factor, the formula relating the number of citations per article in the two years after publication, as a measure of quality of a scientific paper (Hecht *et al.*, 1998; Walter *et al.*, 2003) it has become the agreed bench mark for scientific excellence when comparing journals. This is in spite of obvious anomalies such as the highest impact factors being possessed by review journals that summarise existing research rather than describe original data or hypotheses.

As an editor I have always been concerned that one of the main casualties of the inexorable pursuit of higher impact by prospective authors might be heavy submission rates and a concentration of articles in a small number of prominent journals, with others languishing behind. This could lead to fewer journals being published with a loss to readers, whose preferences do not match conventional measures of impact (Jones *et al.*, 2004). It is also relevant that those parts of psychiatry that require a longer period to develop and replicate research studies, particularly in social psychiatry and health service policy (eg Andrews *et al.*, 2004), are handicapped as publications resulting from new initiatives will mostly come outside the two year window of the impact factor calculation. Smaller journals often have a longer delay to publication and this too can influence the impact factor

adversely (Yu *et al.*, 2005) (This is clearly of importance to journals such as *Epidemiologia e Psichiatria Sociale* and corrective action might need to be taken).

Goldberg & Mann (2006), in their review of a UK academic department, suggest that authors with articles that are not of top international standing 'should find a home in a journal with impact factors between 2 and 4', even if this was to 'a non-British journal with the same level of impact, thus indicating international interest in their work'. This is sensible advice in an international market, but it is not clear whether it is being followed in practice. I hypothesised that the introduction of the impact factor might have the negative effect of raising the impact factors of the top journals and reducing those of the lower ones. I therefore examined the impact factors of the top five general psychiatric journals (with impact factors above 3) and compared with the middle five (impact factors between 1 and 2) for the years 1997 and 2005.

RESULTS

The results (table I) show that the hypothesis was not supported. The absolute increase in impact factor between 1997 and 2005 is virtually the same, but proportionately the increase for the less favoured journals is much higher.

DISCUSSION

The results are encouraging. Middle grade journals are not being 'squeezed out of the market' by the introduction of the impact factor and, indeed, all may be benefiting. Because of the many ways in which the impact factor can be manipulated - a complex exercise that benefits

Table I. – Change in impact factors of 10 top and middle ranking general psychiatric journals between 1997 and 2005.

General psychiatric journals of high impact (>3)	Impact factor - 1997	Impact factor - 2005	% increase since 1997
<i>Archives of General Psychiatry</i>	10.751	12.642	17.6
<i>American Journal of Psychiatry</i>	6.501	8.286	27.5
<i>British Journal of Psychiatry</i>	3.265	4.956	51.8
<i>Journal of Clinical Psychiatry</i>	4.003	5.038	25.9
<i>Psychological Medicine</i>	3.017	3.476	15.2
Mean	5.507	6.874	24.7
General Psychiatric journals of middle impact factor (1-2)			
<i>Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica</i>	1.588	2.968	86.9
<i>Canadian Journal of Psychiatry</i>	1.151	2.259	96.3
<i>Comprehensive Psychiatry</i>	1.246	1.748	40.3
<i>Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease</i>	1.32	1.738	31.7
<i>Journal of Psychiatric Research</i>	1.605	3.301	105.7
Mean	1.382	2.403	73.9

from the skills of a modern Machiavelli - it should not be concluded that articles are necessarily on an improving trend, but certainly using current measures of research performance audit, all journals of merit are holding their own. I venture to suggest that this bodes well for *Epidemiologia e Psichiatria Sociale* in the coming years.

Peter Tyrer

Department of Psychological Medicine,
Imperial College, St Dunstan's Road,
London W6 8RP, (United Kingdom).

Fax: +44-207-386-1216

E-mail: p.tyrer@imperial.ac.uk

Declaration of Interest: The author is Editor
of the *British Journal of Psychiatry*.

Received 06.07.2006

Accepted on 06.07.2006

REFERENCES

- Andrews G., Issakidis C., Sanderson K., Corry J. & Lapsley H. (2004). Utilising survey data to inform public policy: comparison of the cost-effectiveness of treatment of ten mental disorders. *British Journal of Psychiatry* 184, 526-533.
- Goldberg D. & Mann A. (2006). How should financial support for research be distributed to universities? The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in England and Wales. *Epidemiologia e Psichiatria Sociale* 15, 104-108.
- Jones T., Hanney S., Buxton M. & Burns T. (2004). What British psychiatrists read: questionnaire survey of journal usage among clinicians. *British Journal of Psychiatry* 185, 251-257
- Hecht F., Hecht B.K. & Sandberg A.A. (1998). The journal "impact factor": A misnamed, misleading, misused measure. *Cancer Genetics and Cytogenetics* 104, 77-81.
- Walter G., Bloch S., Hunt G. & Fisher K. (2003). Counting on citations: a flawed way to measure quality. *Medical Journal of Australia* 178, 280.
- Yu G., Wang X.H. & Yu D.R. (2005). The influence of publication delays on impact factors. *Scientometrics* 64, 235-246.