

Journal impact factors depend on more than just publication language

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The interests in a journal's impact factor are many-fold. Authors consider the impact factor prior to submitting an article to a particular journal. Editors are keen to increase or at least maintain a given impact factor, because authors choose a journal with a high impact factor for publication of their work. More submissions allow a superior selection of manuscripts to be ultimately printed (and hopefully a future increase of the impact factor). Faculty committees involved in promotions or search of new members rely heavily on impact factors, as do scientific boards of granting institutions. Publishers observe the impact factors of their journals (in addition to circulation numbers and incomes from advertisements). This allows them to assess the quality of editorial boards and their policy. "Impactitis" is unavoidable and cure appears difficult if not impossible.

Inherent to the increasing diversity of biomedical sciences are referees with limited expertise in a particular field, and lack of time to read. To add the numbers of impact factors from several dozens of publications takes neither much time nor the expertise to read and understand science. It makes me sometimes shiver to hear how some honourable and mighty members of committees and boards degrade themselves to simple accountants, adding and averaging impact factors and subsequently communicating these bare figures to colleagues and authorities.

Eugene Garfield proposed the concept of a journal citation analysis in 1955 and suggested that such data would help librarians in the selection of journals, editors in the evaluation of their journals, including a comparison with their competitors, and authors in the decision where to publish [1]. Later the impact factor was used as a criterion to select the journals that were to be included in the Science Citation Index. Also the latest paper by Garfield on the subject [2] suggested that the author's quality should not be judged by the impact factor of the journals in which he/she has published. This brings us back to the question whether authors should select a journal merely based on the impact factor? They likely will, as long as those who judge them base their opinion on the impact factor of the journals in which they publish. How-

ever, additional factors will influence authors' decisions of where to submit. Full text open access at no cost (FUTON) was recently found to affect authors' decisions as to submit a paper to a particular journal [3].

In this issue of the *SMW* (page 441) Mueller and collaborators investigated the association between impact factors and the language of general internal medicine journals. They found that the journal's impact factor is more associated with journal language (English versus non-English) than a journal's country of origin. This study indirectly acclaims our decision of 2000 to change the language of our journal with a more than 125-year-old tradition from a multilingual to an all-English-language journal in 2001.

The editorial board of the *SMW* has made several other important changes at the same time or in preparation of the language change. We changed the categories of articles limiting them to original research papers and reviews, and eliminating tutorials and case reports. Furthermore, we included a professional statistical referee for all original articles in the review process, and supported the authors with a copy editing staff of native English-speaking members [4, 5]. Last but not least, we improved our previously established FUTON policy providing readers with a direct link through Medline to all articles in full text at no cost. FUTON has previously been shown by Mueller et al. [6] to increase a journal's impact factor. This report would have merited being included in the language analysis by the same group in this issue.

The study, be it well performed and providing important information for editors and authors, is too constrained to the language issue. By changing our focus on research articles and scientific reviews we addressed other readers and an international readership. We left articles of continuous education to the Forum, the new national journal for continuous education that publishes in our national languages, reaching clinicians and practitioners. We are convinced that the change of the *SMW* to an undiluted scientific journal was an important step for the observed increase in the impact factor – the change to an all-English-language journal was just the consequence of this decision.

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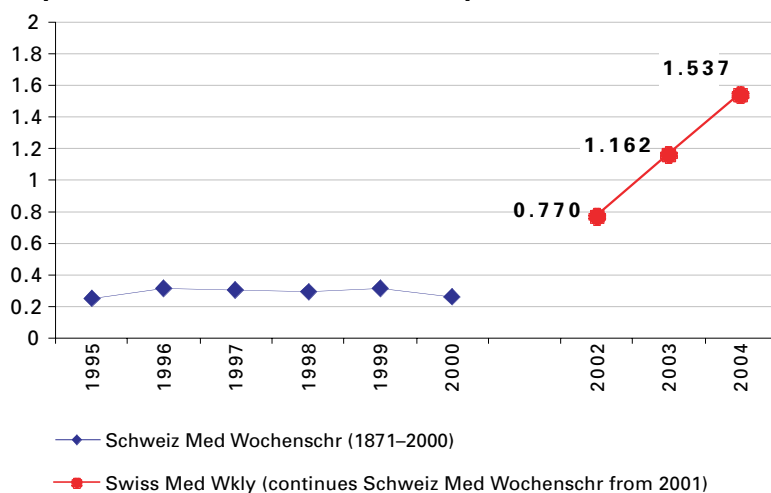
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