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The Impact of "Impact Factor" on Medical Journalism in the Developing World!

When I was looking for a journal to publish my MD thesis paper(1), I had only one criterion in mind: the journal should be indexed in the Medline, so that others can easily find and read it. I had not even heard about Impact Factor (IF) at that time. These days however, authors and scientific institutions have an obsession for IF, and this overshadows the quality of the papers to some extent. Papers published in a high IF journal may be valued more just because of the name and prestige of the journal!

Many developing countries have scales tuned to IFs for granting financial rewards to papers published in international journals(2). Sometimes, the reward for publishing a non-peer-reviewed letter in a high IF journal is more than a peer-reviewed original article published in a low IF journal. Needless to say, un-indexed local journals receive little attention. In the mean time, some science journals with a low IF artfully try to boost their ranking which makes IF even more questionable(3).

Cash rewards may cause a rapid increase in the number of international publications, but do not guarantee the quality of scientific work. Good papers published in local journals not indexed by ISI are simply ignored. This shifts submissions towards well established international journals, undermines scientific journalism in the developing countries and widens the gap between the high and low IF journals.

The nature of most of the research done in the developing world is different from the developed

world. The developing world needs to do more epidemiological and health system research to meet its own domestic needs. The West is not that interested in diseases of poverty. This kind of research does not often get published in the high IF journals and if published in local journals, will not be cited or even viewed very often! I believe the best policy to support scientific journalism in the developing world is just to forget about the luxury of IF and to give the local journals a chance to thrive.

IF should not be used as the only criterion to evaluate the caliber of a journal, nor should it be used to evaluate an individual scientific paper. This will create a systematic bias as far as how scientific publications especially from the developing world, are evaluated. This is not at all healthy for scientific research, particularly in the developing world.

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