Impact Factors in Scientific Journals: Keeping a Balance for the JOI Readers

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Journal of Oral Implantology (JOI) received its first impact factor, calculated as 1.527, a few weeks ago. This is an important step in the modernization and improvement of the Journal, and the result of a 3-year long endeavor for the editorial team. Earning this impact factor places JOI among the leading international dental journals. With this new evaluation instrument, JOI will continue to pursue the highest standards for our readership.

This good news is also occasion to think about what we want for JOI in the future. Having a good impact factor offers bright perspectives; but it is also a potential threat for the Journal if our readers overestimate its significance and importance.

The impact factor is an instrument of academic metrics designed to evaluate the significance of a journal. This measure is calculated each year and reflects the average number of citations received by the articles published by a journal in the 2 preceding years. For example, the 2011 impact factor for JOI was calculated as the number of JOI citations in indexed journals during 2011 for JOI articles published in 2009 and 2010, divided by the total number of citable articles published in JOI during that time period.

Each year the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI), now part of Thomson Reuters Corporation, a leading source of information for businesses and professionals, publishes the impact factor of all indexed journals. The ISI offers a bibliographic database with an extensive citation database covering thousands of academic journals. This database allows a researcher to identify the articles cited most frequently and who has cited them. It should be noted that a private, multi-national company has established this database, which has a large influence on the evolution of science.

The impact factor, along with other metric systems (eg, h-index—a measure of the productivity and impact of the published works of an author), is now important in all academic fields. There is an international interest in these evaluations; however, some individuals criticize the use of such citation metrics to evaluate the quality of published articles. European countries are a bit late in recognition of the impact factor and metrics, while most Asia-Pacific countries (among them Australia, Korea, and China) have completely adopted the impact factor system for the evaluation of their educational institutions. The use of these metrics in the US, particularly in the dental field, is still arbitrary depending upon the academic environment.

In a globalized world of implacable international competitions in all fields, instruments of metrics are necessary to determine the global ranking of universities. Many governments and national foundations use these metrics to determine which university or researcher deserves increased funding,
and therefore, they influence the career evolution of educators. Prospective students and their parents are looking for rankings before deciding to attend a particular university. This is the reason the Shanghai JiaoTong World University ranking was created: to determine the best schools for students to attend. A high-ranked university may have more advantages for students and offer greater opportunities to prospective applicants. The financial impact of these metric instruments is also significant.

When the impact factor appears in the life of a journal, there is a temptation to push for a higher rating. Dental journals often decide to reduce the quantity of clinical articles (particularly case reports) and to increase the number of research articles or review papers to obtain a higher rating. Review articles are cited more than any other papers.1–6 For instance, the highest impact factor of all dental journals is Periodontology 2000, with an impact of 3.961 in 2011. This journal only publishes review articles. Because of this policy, journals often become more academic and basic science–oriented. Clinically related journals tend to have lower, but still significant, impact factors (eg, 2011: Implant Dentistry, 1.05; International Journal of Oral & Maxillofacial Implants [JOMI], 1.776; Journal of the American Dental Association [JADA], 1.773). It is not clear if the scientific level increases significantly with such policy, but it is clear that the clinician nonacademic readership suffers from this evolution.

Here we have the true limitation of the impact factor. A journal should consider science and its community of readers,7 and not be overly concerned with metrics. A journal like JOI needs to provide its readers with practical, clinical, and scientific knowledge, and not become a compilation of clinically irrelevant literature and verbiage primarily concerned with an abstract number like the impact factor.

Therefore, the JOI editors have decided to follow their own path: to publish more case reports (as case letters),8 more short research studies with practical outcomes (as research letters)9,10 and continue to bring clinically–related knowledge to its readers.11

The impact factor is an instrument that must be used properly. JOI editors also believe that with a strong clinical–oriented editorial policy, the Journal will be able to reach and maintain a very respectable impact factor. Today, the highest impact factors in medical journals are obtained by well–established clinical journals, such as JAMA or The New England Journal of Medicine. If JOI can maintain a significant impact factor and continue to provide clinically relevant material, it will fulfill its objectives.

Today is an important step in the evolution of the journal.

REFERENCES