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Impact Factors – time to move on?

Words are somewhat innocent commodities, prey to being used, interpreted or misinterpreted out of context, indeed one might even say against their will, if indeed a word could be said to have an existence that included a quality as human as a will.

The word 'impact' is just such an example, quite frequently used now in 'American' English in contexts to describe a product or event which "will impact your life significantly for the better". In such a circumstance English English would phrase it as "will have an impact on your life significantly for the better". But let's not get into that just now.

In relation to journal publication however the word 'impact' has been given a very specific meaning as the opinion paper by Scully and Lodge¹ in this issue points out. The Impact Factor (IF) of a journal has been elevated to levels of particular significance often outside its correct interpretation, indeed as the authors write it can be an "extremely blunt instrument". So what is an Impact Factor and what relevance does it have to the *BDJ*?

As Scully and Lodge's paper explains the IF of a journal is a measure of the frequency with which the 'average article' has been cited in a particular year and is calculated through a quite complex and not entirely unbiased method. This apparently gives the IF an independence and validity as a measure of fairness, whereas this is not entirely so, as the paper details.

Unfortunately the IF has been used not only as it was originally intended, a quantitative assessment of citations, but also in some quarters as an apparently authoritative judgement on worth. Hence some academic institutions use it to assess the quality of candidates, while some authors use it for guidance as to which journal to submit their work. However, since the current system began in the 1960s, other measures have become available, notably the Internet. The *BDJ* website, for example, provides us with a wealth of statistical information about the 'hits' and duration of visits to particular pages, papers and other content of the journal. In a very real sense this gives us a precise appraisal of the number of times a paper is 'personally' cited by those who find it of direct relevance, value and hence

individual 'impact'. Arguably a much more relevant measure, which has never previously been available.

Overwhelmingly, each month, the top ten visits are to the papers and articles in the Practice section, and predominantly of the 'series' papers based on practical subject areas. Taken together with correspondence, word of mouth and sales of the series subsequently published as *BDJ* Books, this very strongly suggests a worth of a different kind to that indicated by the IF. Added to this is the CPD element of the *BDJ*, another area in which the value of research papers is given particular prominence. Many readers report that they now read research papers in a very different way to previously and the 7,000 plus regular registered users of *BDJ* CPD attest to another facet of the 'impact' of published scientific literature.

I would not want readers to go away with the idea that we are in anyway ignoring, rejecting or snubbing the IF, since it clearly has a place, albeit a tightly defined and specific one. Indeed the *BDJ* is the number two dental society journal in the world (after *JADA*) in the IF listings. We are very clear that the *BDJ* remains committed to publishing high quality and relevant dental research. Indeed, working with the newly appointed Board of Advisors, comprising a group of very well respected academics, we are currently developing several initiatives which are intended to enhance the appeal of the *BDJ* to academics and researchers and indeed to give the journal a greater 'impact' on their professional lives, whilst keeping this in balance with the needs of all readers and users.

So, does this mean that the unfairly battered word 'impact' will be better represented in future journal publication? Probably not in the short term as people will hang on to their established prejudices but as time goes by there is a distinct possibility that the need to assess quality, admittedly more difficult to define, will supersede the misunderstood predominance of the 'rather blunt instrument'.

1. Scully C, Lodge H. Impact factors and their significance; overrated or misused? *Br Dent J* 2005; 198: 391-393.

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