

RESPONSE by Eugene Garfield to Richard Smith's article "Journal accused of manipulating impact factor" *BMJ*1997;314doi: 10.1136/bmj.314.7079.461d(Published 15 February 1997) Cite this as: *BMJ*1997;314:461.5

Letter

Editors are justified in asking authors to cite equivalent references from same journal

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Editor—Richard Smith's criticism of the editorial judgment of *Leukemia*, which asked authors to increase the number of references to papers published in *Leukemia*, [1](#) seems harsh in view of the well known Matthew effect.[2](#) Merton originally coined this term to describe the frequent misallocation of credit to the more eminent author of coauthored papers, but it can be applied as well to the citation of prestigious journals. Citation behaviour is complex, but most manuscripts involve self citation, and there are many times when any one of several references will satisfy the need for documentation. When either of two alternative references is relevant there may be a tendency to cite the more prestigious source. Moreover, authors write for different audiences and choose their references accordingly. In a manuscript that I have just sent to the *BMJ* I cited a paper published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*. In another journal I might have referred to the paper's reprinted version in *Current Contents*.

Recognising the reality of the Matthew effect, I believe that an editor is justified in reminding authors to cite equivalent references from the same journal, if only because readers of that journal presumably have ready access to it. To call this "manipulation" seems excessive unless the references chosen are irrelevant or mere window dressing.

References

1. [Smith R](#), *Journal accused of manipulating impact factor. BMJ* 1997;314:463. (15 February.)

2. Merton RK *The Matthew effect in science: the reward and communication systems of science. Science* 1968;199:55#63.

News

Journal accused of manipulating impact factor

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Richard Smith, Editor, British Medical Journal

The journal *Leukemia*, which is owned by Macmillan magazines, has been accused of trying to manipulate its impact factor, the measure used to rank the importance of scientific journals. The accusation comes from Terry Hamblin, consultant haematologist at the Royal Bournemouth Hospital and editor of *Leukemia Research*, a rival to *Leukemia*.

Dr Hamblin has sent the *BMJ* a copy of a letter received by authors who had submitted a paper to *Leukemia* in October 1996 asking them to increase the number of references to papers published in *Leukemia*. This would increase the journal's impact factor, which is calculated by dividing the number of citations of papers in the journal by the number of papers that could be cited. The impact factor has become much more important in recent years because many countries consider the impact factors of the journals in which researchers publish when judging the researchers and making decisions about future funding (p 498).

The letter from *Leukemia* said: "Manuscripts that have been published in *Leukemia* are too frequently ignored in the reference list of newly submitted manuscripts, even though they may be extremely relevant. As we all know, the scientific community can suffer from selective memory when giving credit to colleagues. While we have little power over other journals, we can at least start by giving you and others proper credit in *Leukemia*. We have noticed that you cite *Leukemia* [once in 42 references]. Consequently, we kindly ask you to add references of articles published in *Leukemia* to your present article."

This is a blatant attempt to increase the journal's impact factor," said Dr Hamblin. "I accept that authors sometimes do not cite relevant papers, but I have never encountered a journal that specifically requested an increase in the number of times that journal is cited in the bibliography."

Dr Nicole Muller-Bérat, the editor of *Leukemia*, denies that the journal is trying to manipulate its impact factor. "We introduced the policy of asking people to cite

Leukemia for two main reasons. Firstly, we have received, and published, letters from authors saying that papers we have published have neglected to cite important papers published in *Leukemia*. Secondly, our reviewers remember important papers published in major journals like *Blood*, *Cell*, and the *British Journal of Haematology*, but they forget about important papers published in *Leukemia*“.

Dr Muller-Bérat believes that Dr Hamblin is motivated to make his accusation by professional jealousy. She founded *Leukemia Research*, the journal he edits, with her husband, but he became the editor in 1986. Since then the impact factor has fallen from 2.7 to 1.179. She and her husband also founded *Leukemia* in 1987, and by 1991 it had an impact factor of 3.059. Following changes in the editorial team, the impact factor fell to 1.7 but has now risen to 2.35.

David Pendlebury, an analyst at the Institute of Scientific Information in Philadelphia, which calculates journals' impact factors, said: “We have never heard of a case like this before. It is a distortion of the scientific process.” Richard Horton, editor of the *Lancet*, said: “Given the importance attached to impact factors this manipulation seems an appalling lapse of editorial judgment.”