

The Impact Factor of *Wiener klinische Wochenschrift*

Dear Sir,

in their paper “Wiener klinische Wochenschrift: Publication patterns 1990–2000,” *Wiener klinische Wochenschrift* (WKW) 113 (15–16): 610–615 (August 2001), Hofbauer et al. have made a valiant effort to sell authors on publishing in WKW by trying to denigrate the value of the Journal Impact Factor. By referring to statements by me and others about the use of impact factors as surrogates for actual citation counts, they leap to the conclusion that impact factors for evaluating journals is also misleading. In short, they would “throw the baby out with the bath water.”

All other things being equal, it will be hard to convince readers and librarians to subscribe to WKW or any other journal if they can choose, for an equal expenditure, a journal with a much higher impact. Are these authors suggesting that the average quality and quantity of articles published in a journal have no significance and what matters is just the few papers that managed to be cited a dozen times in a five- to ten-year period?

Apart from purely subjective methods of evaluation, a “new” criterion is suggested ... Let us now compute a journal ranking based on its top ten articles over a ten-year period. The authors show that the most-cited WKW article has performed as well as, or better than, the *European Journal of Clinical Investigation* or *Deutsche Medizinische Wochenschrift* for 1996 and 1997. They would have the reader believe that the *European Journal of Clinical Investigation's* Impact Factor of 1.97 should be disregarded even though both *Wiener klinische Wochenschrift* and *Deutsche Medizinische Wochenschrift* achieved an impact of 0.50 and 0.65 respectively.

Dear Sir,

with interest I am responding to the Letter to the Editor of Dr. Eugene Garfield. I fully understand his emotions concerning the excellent idea the impact factor undoubtedly is. And I understand the description of his “baby”. In my personal research, I am considering leukocyte transmigration and the “Hofbauer-Chamber” as “my baby”.

We believe that the impact factor is very useful to describe the quality of a journal. But there are more options to describe the quality of a journal and we have proposed in our paper an alternative way to validate a journal such as the *Wiener klinische Wochenschrift* [1]. As a basis we used the excellent ISI data, the science citation index (SCI). We cannot agree with Dr. Garfield's state-

They offer these rationalizations along with the selective citation of mainly anecdotal criticism, that is, complaints about alleged inaccuracies in ISI Data. It is noteworthy that of the 16 WKW papers which were listed as most cited, only 3 were in German. Not only was Stanek's paper in WKW published in English, but his most-cited papers were published in *New England Journal of Medicine* 1990 and *Lancet* in 1985. Will WKW now become an all-English journal to achieve higher impact?

I have often stated that local or regional vernacular journals play a useful role in the publication arena. Readers will enjoy their local flavor, independent of their international research impact. If they prove useful in clinical practice or serve a reviewing function, they need not be judged by citation impact. But if they aspire to compete on the international level and want to appeal to the research community, then they must be judged by the same criteria.

Posting *Wiener klinische Wochenschrift* to the Web free of charge should help it find additional readership and perhaps citations. But the ultimate determinant is the quality of research reported and contrary to what was implied, there is plenty of data to show that high quality is correlated with high citation.

Sincerely,
Eugene Garfield

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ment that we want to allege inaccuracies in ISI data. We are convinced that the Institute of Scientific Information in Philadelphia is doing an excellent job for the scientific community worldwide.

We fully agree to Dr. Garfield's opinion about the importance of the English language for the scientific community. We have discussed this point very extensively in our book “European Research ... [2] which is published in English and in German. There is no doubt, an English paper is reaching a broader readership. However, the citation of an article and the calculation of the Impact Factor is not necessarily dependent on the language. The exclusively German journal *Der Anesthetist*, the leading journal in anesthesiology in German speaking countries, contains highly cited papers. The reason for this is that German

speaking anesthesiologists tend to cite their most influential anesthesia journal even in non-German language journals.

On the other hand, a high impact factor can only be achieved by a journal which has successfully undergone the hard indexing process of the Institute of Science Citation. A young journal needs time to get through this process and during this period the journal has not yet acquired an impact factor. But good articles in such young journals are cited as papers in high ranked journals. Thus, a good study published in a young, so far not listed journal can also be found in the Science Citation Index.

Even though almost everybody criticizes the current influence of the impact factor on our younger colleague's fate, it seems impossible to down-grade its significance. Interestingly, the concept of "Impact Factor" is changing due to the internet revolution. For a long time, a better journal used to have more subscribers, and therefore a better impact factor. However, with more and more researchers retrieving published material from the internet and e-journals, the number of subscribers to a journal is no longer important. It will be interesting to see how the concept of publication and impact factor will evolve under these new circumstances.

Comment by the Editor

Because Eugene Garfield in his "Letter to the Editor" touches several points addressed in my editorial accompanying the paper by Hofbauer et al. I feel entitled to make the following statements:

ISI Science Citation Index, Current Contents, Journal Citation Report, where the Impact Factor is given is a commercial enterprise originally founded by Mr. Garfield for which he certainly is to be congratulated. However, intrinsically there is some kind of "conflict of interest" and an unbiased comment is not necessarily to be expected (which nevertheless can only partially explain the polemic nature of his letter).

Nobody challenges the necessity to evaluate, to measure the quality of science. The question is whether the Impact Factor is the appropriate tool. In his earlier days Garfield himself has stressed that the Impact Factor is not suitable for evaluation of the quality of individual papers or – the composite Impact Factor – of the scientific power of a researcher. Instead, the Impact Factor has been designed for the evaluation of scientific journals. There is a plethora of literature on the limitations of the Impact Factor and I don't want to reiterate this issue (I have mentioned several points in the editorial). The simple statement by Hofbauer and also by myself was, that the absolute number of citations is a much more appropriate index of the importance of a given paper than the Impact Factor of the journal where the paper has appeared. Whether a time factor – as Hofbauer suggests – corrected for the time that has elapsed since the publication of the paper, should be introduced remains to be discussed – but it is certainly not as illogical as Garfield wants us to believe.

Without any doubt, Dr. Garfield has done an excellent job designing the Impact Factor and we thank him for his discussion. We admit that the stimulation of such responses was the aim of our publication. Science lives from stimulation and inspiration, even if the opinions are sometimes a little bit different.

Kind regards,

Roland Hofbauer, Alan D. Kaye, Bernhard Gmeiner, and Michael Frass

University of Vienna and Texas Tech University, USA.

References

1. Hofbauer R, Gmeiner B, Kaye AD, Frass M (2001) "Wiener klinische Wochenschrift": Publication patterns 1990–2000. *Wien Klin Wochenschr* 113: 610–615
2. Hofbauer R, Gmeiner B, Kaye AD, Frass M (2001) European Research and the new MFBP-Index. VICER Vienna

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A further basic message was, that if a paper is of high quality, it is also cited if published not in one of the larger journals. This point has frequently been shown and I do not see why Garfield is so severely opposed to this largely accepted fact. The statement we "sell authors on publishing in WKW by trying to denigrate the value of the Impact Factor" remains obscure to me. Certainly, we want to attract papers which have a high chance of being cited and hopefully we will also increase our citation rates.

Coming to the publication language the situation even becomes more clouded. Yes, we try to publish all material containing original data in the language of science, in English; in fact we publish more than 60% of all articles in English, and I can not see what is wrong with this. Medicine however, – Dr Garfield may not agree – has also something to do with culture and so we do not totally eliminate German but use this language for some Editorials, articles on Medicine and Culture, Ethics in Medicine, Medicine and History and similar issues. If an author insists to publish in German, we do not oppose.

Similarly, E. Garfield criticized the WKW for having an electronic version. At the moment there is free access to this version and we are discussing on what conditions this will be available in the future. In a time where on-line availability is aggressively demanded by an initiative of researchers worldwide I can neither see why it should be unfair to offer such an electronic version.

I certainly hope, and I do not think that this is just a reflection of romanticism, that the plurality and diversity of medical information will somehow be preserved in spite of Dr. Garfield's attempts to monopolize his criteria for scientific evaluation.

Wilfred Druml / WKW