

Flawed Impact Factor Severely Undervalued the True Impact of *Medical Hypotheses*

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(Received 2007-09-24; accepted 2007-09-26; published 2007-09-26*)

HIGHLIGHT

Medical Hypotheses has served revolutionary science for over three decades but its impact factor (IF) was ranked very low (0.607 at 2004) until recently (doubled to 1.3 for 2006). In sharp contrast with this low IF, the download rate for this ideas- communicating journal is very high (26000 downloads per month). What does this low IF but high download really mean?

ABSTRACT

Einstein once said that “[I]t is the theory which decides what we can observe”. However, in the experiment-emphasized and data-centric biomedical field ideas often receive less valued and are even not publishable in “normal” science journals. Founded by David Horrobin in 1975, *Medical Hypotheses* has not only survived severe competition in scientific publishing but also increased its standing on the impact factor (IF) evaluation. However, its now “respectable” IF value of 1.3 is still far short in comparison with its high downloading rate of 26000 papers download per month. Why would people be so interested in reading the “ideas” papers published in this revolutionary journal but then not cite them even when some of these earlier published ideas led to their later experimental verified “findings”? How about asking the high IF journals to reveal their download rates and then to see if there is any good parallel between downloading and citation and thus some discrepancy between the citation-based impact factors and the downloading-reflected real impact?

KEY WORDS

Publication, Journal, Impact factor, Downloading rate, Quality, Popularity, Download, Citation, Ideas, Data, Revolutionary science, Normal science, Theory, Observation, *Medical Hypotheses*, David Horrobin

I am glad that *Medical Hypotheses* has made a doubling in its impact factor (IF) within a short two-year period [1]. However, I must say that the real impact of this revolutionary journal is far above the value measured by the flawed IF [2].

Although IF can in general reflect the popularity of a journal the popularity does not necessarily equal to the quality or the impact of a journal. Many high IF journals are also the high retraction journals [3], indicating the poor quality of their publications, at least in some [4]. To a large degree the unreasonably high IF values for some “tabloid” scientific journals or magazines are first built upon

a political pressure-pressed citation for their hot publications and then enhanced with more formality-required citations for their retracted publications [5].

However, history has shown that, as reflected by the records of Nobel Prizes, truly high impact scientific publications were often first communicated by the low IF journals, some of them ended up there because of the rejections by the high IF journals [6].

From my long-time first-hand experience with some very “top” scientific journals/magazines [7], I couldn’t agree more with the assessment that many

high IF journals nowadays are communicators for “normal science” [1]. Ironically these trends-chasing journals/magazines actually enjoy some very high IFs. However, if we all realize that the real impact of a journal should be reflected by its real use and its role in disseminating truly outstanding ideas and dogma-shattering discoveries, and then we probably should disregard the flawed IF.

The true use of a journal can be reflected more correctly by its downloading rates. This is because downloading not only reflects a true interest but also captures an objective moment of people’s initial attitude towards a publication. I know many incidences that scientists got their original ideas from reading an article downloaded from a “less respectable” journal but then shifted their citation to some articles later found in some high IF journals. It is also not a secret that the selection of citation is often not based on the scientific merit of a publication but on the political correctness of how to use that publication. Citing those in power and neglecting those in rivalry are the politically correct things to do if one wishes to secure a publication in a “top” journal because it can increase the acceptability and reduce the resistance of the submission. Intentionally ignoring pioneers’ discovery, especially those communicated in low or no IF, has been a successful strategy for some pretenders to claim their “first” discoveries in high IF journals [8].

I do not know the download rates of other journals but the number of 26000 downloads per month for *Medical Hypotheses* is a very respectable number. I wish other journals also publish their download rates and someone would perform a systematic evaluation on the correlations or discrepancy between the download rates and the citation rates to understand the true impact of the journals.

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* This paper was submitted to *Medical Hypotheses* on September 24, 2007 as a Correspondence. It was rejected on September 26, 2007.

The publication here is the same as submitted to *Medical Hypotheses* except for the added highlight, abstract and keywords.