

EDITORIAL

SHOULD WE PUBLISH IN THE LEBANESE MEDICAL JOURNAL?

<http://www.lebanesemedicaljournal.org/articles/65-4/editorial.pdf>

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Under the impression that the *Lebanese Medical Journal* (LMJ) is not worth reading – and the unfortunate dismal fact that many of us throw the issue before having a look at it – we come to speculate about the wasted effort of the Order, publisher, editors, reviewers, authors and, last but not least, the readers.

The *Lebanese Medical Journal* started as the *Revue Médicale Libanaise* in the year 1948. It was intended to be a link between the members of the Lebanese Order of Physicians (LOP). The published material included case reports, accounts of personal experience and news of the members.

In May 1950, the *Revue Médicale Libanaise* acquired its present title, namely *Lebanese Medical Journal/ Journal Médical Libanais* (LMJ/JML). Over the past 66 years, the publication of the LMJ/JML has been regular except for partial and forced interruption during the years of civil strife (1975-1990). LMJ publishes quarterly, with 9 to 12 articles per issue on average, and 2 to 3 yearly supplements.

The *Lebanese Medical Journal* (LMJ) is the official publication of the Scientific Committee of the Lebanese Order of Physicians (LOP). It publishes a wide variety of manuscripts, which deal with all medical specialties, including in-depth reviews, clinical investigations, basic science for the clinician, invited editorials, case reports, letters to the editor, abstracts of proceedings of annual meetings of national scientific societies and news of the LOP. In addition, a corner is devoted to continuous medical education (CME), and to the history of medicine in Lebanon and in the Arab World. It fulfills the following missions: a) Reports the research made in Lebanon that might not be accepted in international journals due to limitations as small size, local interest, and makes this work internationally known; b) Serves as a direct communication between the members of the Order, and c) Continuing education for clinicians. The LMJ has a print and electronic format (lebanesemedicaljournal.org).

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The **current editorial board** is comprised of Prof. Adel Barbari, Editor in Chief (AUBMC), with 16 other editors from University of Balamand (St. George Hospital-UMC-Beirut), Saint Joseph University (Hôtel-Dieu de France, Beirut), Rafik Hariri University Hospital-Beirut, Makassed General Hospital, Ain Wzein Hospital, American University of Beirut-Medical Center, Sahel Hospital-Beirut, Medical School Holy Spirit University of Kaslik, Lebanese University (Faculty of Medical Sciences) [Ref: LMJ official website].

The LMJ is indexed by: Index Medicus, Embase (Excerpta Medica), Cab Abstracts & Global Health, and CABI Publishing. The issues on line start at the year 2005.

The LMJ does not have an impact factor. Although it does not, a large number of published articles are quoted by international organizations leading to increased worldwide recognition of the impact of this publication in the field of medical journalism. The journal possesses a recent Journal Impact of 0.16 (calculated using ResearchGate data and is based on average citation counts from work published in it).

Is the above enough for us to publish in the LMJ?

Reviewing the scope of medical journals one cannot but start with a brief review of the major medical journals, using the English language and then mention some basic elements of the success of certain medical journals.

The Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine looks to be the first medical journal published in the English literature. Its continuous publication history dates back to 1809. The journal was established in 1806 as the *Medico-Chirurgical Transactions* published by the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society of London. Thereafter *The New England Journal of Medicine* in 1812, *The Lancet* in 1823, *BMJ* in 1840, and *JAMA* in 1883 followed among the highly leading medical journals.

A **journal's impact factor** is a measure of the frequency with which an average article in a journal has been cited in a particular year. The impact factor of a journal is a measure of the number of citations to recent articles published in that journal. It is used as a reflection of the relative importance of a journal within its field. It is calculated as X/Y where: X = number of times that the journal articles were cited in a given year, and Y = total number of "citable items" published by that journal in that same year. Impact factors are calculated yearly starting from 1975 for those journals that are listed in the *Journal Citation Reports*. In any given year, the impact factor of a journal is the number of citations received by articles published in that journal during the two preceding years,

divided by the total number of articles published in that journal during the two preceding years. For example, if a journal has an impact factor of 3 in 2008, then its papers published in 2006 and 2007 received 3 citations each on average in 2008.

Ranking among the highest-impact journals (2016) are the *New England Journal of Medicine* (impact factor/IF: 59.558), *The Lancet* (IF: 44.002), *Nature Biotechnology* (IF: 43.113), *Nature Reviews Immunology* (IF: 39.416), *Nature Materials* (IF: 38.891), *Nature Reviews Molecular Cell Biology* (IF: 38.602), *JAMA* (IF: 37.684), *Science* journal (IF: 33.6111), etc. Though numerous criticisms have been made regarding the use of impact factors regarding their non-reproducibility, validity, effect on behavior of scholars, editors and other stakeholders, field-dependent factors, arithmetic mean, devaluing papers in certain subjects, and the introduction of many editorial policies that raise the impact factor, it remains one of the basic factors that attract authors.

Impact factors are still used during many procedures:

- to select excellent candidates for positions as PhD student, postdoc and academic staff
- to select recipients of grants
- to promote professors
- to distribute internal grants, resources and infrastructures in universities
- to establish scientific collaborations in the context of international networks
- to select reviewers and editors for journals
- to select speakers on scientific conferences
- to select members of scientific commissions e.g. to evaluate grant proposals or select new staff members
- to determine the scientific output in university rankings

and many others.

What should be done for a journal to attract the best authors; how should it be managed?

The literature usually puts it in the hands of editors being in charge of the success of a medical journal. Editors have to:

1. Ensure that their journals satisfy their owners, their authors, and their readers.

However, most editors are full-time scientists and clinicians that, most likely, have had little formal training in the craft of editing. Despite this, they are expected to provide leadership and manage a complex and time-consuming system of quality control and journal development. So editors have to understand their roles and how to maximize the effectiveness of editorial boards, identify strategies for improving the quality of content by attracting good articles, identify and deal with ethical issues to ensure the integrity of their journal, ensure that the journal meets the needs of the readers, improve visibility and impact of the journal, and have a clear action plan for the years to come. They have to work with authors to secure the best content. They need people who share their passion and com-

mitment, and are willing to promote a common cause. Their team members could be a mix of experienced and new researchers. They should create an environment of learning and always listen to the opinions of their editorial board and advisory team.

2. Commit themselves to the journal. This is something which requires sheer determination, passion and time commitment. It's also very fulfilling though, offering them chance to improve their knowledge, help others and promote a specific viewpoint in research. If they are academics or scientists, the institute they work with, should recognize their role. Most western academic institutes consider it a 'service to society'. They should be honest about the journal, highlight its good qualities and at the same time be open to discuss its weaknesses and how to improve them. Embracing criticism in a positive manner always helps.
3. Be creative. Make sure they are open to ideas and new ways to promote the journal – for example, at conferences, seminars and on social media. If the journal is in a niche area and is of good quality, key opinion leaders will be happy to contribute and can help you to raise awareness.
4. The quality of the journal is the single most important thing in its success. A high quality journal will attract high quality submissions and this creates a virtuous circle. Editors don't have to publish every article submitted. However, even if they reject articles, they should provide timely feedback in a positive manner. The researchers will appreciate it.
5. Invest their full energy in every issue. Give it one hundred percent effort and ensure the editorial quality, design and layout are as perfect as possible. It will pay off.
6. Move to new horizons. Running a small and independent journal comes with benefits and challenges. However, if they don't have a proper support structure in place and if it is not their full time job, after few years they may want to consider a bigger platform for the journal.

Is it worth to invest that much in our LMJ?

Looking at the above, our journal needs a lot of effort on a lot of aspects. Noteworthy again is the lack of an impact factor which, as said, has its flaws. Nevertheless, at least from the 1970s, it remains the chief quantitative measure of the quality of a journal, especially in the scientific, technical and medical fields (not so much in social sciences – and for journals in the arts and humanities impact factors are not calculated at all).

It goes without saying then, that one of the main goals of journal editors is to get the impact factor in the first place and then to increase its value systematically. A journal needs to meet specific selection criteria, such as: Basic Publishing Standards, Editorial Content, and Citation Analysis. Most often editors aim to increase its value each year as much as possible, by growing number of submissions,

growing quality and keeping volume, growing journal's visibility, and publishing in Open Access. Furthermore young researchers are confronted with the problem that their scientific quality will be judged based on the impact factors of their publications – especially in contexts which are highly relevant for their early careers such as in selection committees (to get hired) and grant committees (to get funding).

Second, our editors should embark on the above requirements which, as hard as they look, should be regarded as their duty. It might be regarded as cheap labor; nevertheless it is still their commitment to raising the standards of the sole country's medical journal that is the sole representative of thousands of physicians, two orders and close to ten university hospitals, 30 medical societies, and a lot of academic centers that enjoy their international standards, forgetting their mother medical journal. The mentioned job, of course, could be easier said than being done.

Third point should stress, in my opinion, on the financial support provided to the LMJ, a non-profit one. No medical journal can survive without proper funding. Providing relevant, reliable, and consistent levels of content in journals costs money. Besides the costs of the technology are not just related to the Web, but apply to all the other technical systems that publishers have to create and integrate. Journals have a lot of publishing-related expenses, aside from the “for free” personal effort of the editors, as:

1. Cost of paper, printing, ink, and binding
2. Distribution, costs of dissemination, online access - Internet publishing services, and paper editions that are still a need
3. Editorial services
4. Costs of production and publication
5. Costs of acquiring the content that will be produced
6. Costs that make a journal competitive with other journals
7. Processing costs for the content
8. Costs of archiving.

Where does the money come from?

Our LMJ is solely funded by the LOP. This, to the best of our knowledge, might not be sufficient to advance the above mentioned factors. All are aware of the unfortunate limitations. Someone always pays. It is quite an ambitious job to make the LMJ a self-sufficient one. So other potential funding sources to be considered as:

1. Industry
2. Nonindustry support
3. Mixed support
4. Advertisement
5. Sales of reprints
6. Grants
7. Gala dinners
8. Subscription fees
9. University CME workshops
10. User fees and authors' pays

11. Library budgets

12. Membership to institutions for free reading, etc. should be sought, one way or the other!

As evident the pressures to be fast are growing, yet high quality must be maintained. The LMJ should look into the above costs and revenues and seek to make its publication a monthly, scientific, high standard quality, multi-linguistic considering readily available English translations for better and faster dissemination. Noteworthy again is that this is a general medical journal that encompasses all the innumerable medical specialties, and aims to reach all the Lebanese medical scientists.

Am I unrealistic?

The LMJ stakeholders should decide whether the above are feasible or not. The risks, particularly for a small organization with modest reserves, simply cannot be taken. However I, personally, see no reason why our journal should not rise gradually but consistently with a clear plan of action. The efforts of the editors and the LOP have, no doubt, sustained this modest, but indispensable publication without which Lebanon will have no national medical journal. The negative implications of this happening, though very unlikely, are quite catastrophic as this will deplete the Lebanese scientists of their personal medical contribution and simply melt into the international prestigious publication system that makes use of this “brain drain” whether they are abroad or not. Our medical scientists get recognized, in their country, by their international publications way before their recognition by their local ones, and why not?! The reasons are quite obvious. It is time, I guess, for all parties involved, including the authors, to join efforts to further the standard of their journal and aim to reach better levels to encourage attempts to publish in the Lebanese Medical Journal. Will our authors not mind publishing a tiny part of their easily internationally accepted manuscripts in the LMJ? Will they contribute to enriching the quality of their journal? By the same thinking, will the editors work on attracting them to do so? Will the LOP in association with the medical organizations unite to ask the authors to share a part of their publications with the LMJ? Our local medical research areas (genetic, infectious, hematology-oncology, neurology, endocrinology, cardiologic, pathology, public health, and many more you bet) are of international interest and esteem. The mentioned are honestly asked to contribute, more and more, so that readers from the globe will pay more attention to our mother journal. Being realistic or not, I am afraid if this is not done, many will not care to publish there, and more will not care reading that.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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