

The place of the *British Journal of Psychiatry* in the mental health league

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Abstract. The *British Journal of Psychiatry* is an independent mainstream general psychiatric journal that competes reasonably well with others in the field. It does so by keeping a healthy balance between the demands of its readers, its contributors and the need for good science. It publishes an eclectic mix of original articles, reviews, editorials, reappraisals, comment, opinion and extras, the latter including poetry, short summaries, literature and psychiatry, and a touch of humour. These contributions are not always in keeping with the harsh requirements of the impact factor, but we judge that this makes for a better all-round journal that advances psychiatry in all its manifold aspects and is anything but dull.

Declaration of Interest: None.

When I became editor of the *British Journal of Psychiatry* in 2003 I set myself eight targets that were outlined in my first editorial (Tyler, 2003). I wrote that I 'would like the journal to be both topical and learned, to have both immediate and long term impact, to appeal equally to the busy clinician and the earnest researcher, and to be both serious and entertaining'. The previous editor, Greg Wilkinson, had a more single minded aim at the beginning of his editorship that he wanted the *British Journal of Psychiatry* to be the leading international journal of psychiatry (Wilkinson, 1994). During Dr Wilkinson's ten year term of office he succeeded in making the British Journal of Psychiatry a much more prestigious journal in terms of its impact factor (Figure 1) and, perhaps more than most he realised that the impact factor would be the guiding beacon for many editors who wish to improve their journals. A very similar rise in impact factor, and more dramatic, was shown by Giovanni Fava as editor of *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* over a shorter period. My eight targets have continued to be followed but many of them do not lend themselves well to a rise in impact factor. I think a useful discussion can be had about each of them and how they can improve a journal but not necessarily improve its apparent scientific standard.

TOPICAL AND LEARNED

All journals would like to have papers that indicate that they are both topical and learned. Indeed, all professional journals have the common title of 'learned journal'. When we gave the British Journal of Psychiatry a new look in 2008 I compared it with the first learned journal in the English language, The *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, which had a neat summary of its aims, which were to describe 'the present undertakings, studies and labours of the ingenious in many considerable parts of the world' (Tyler, 2008a). Since that time over two centuries ago every learned journal has, to some extent, been in competition with others to achieve exactly the same aims. As a consequence all the contributors to this set of articles are like the managers of football teams fighting for supremacy in the same league. Unfortunately in this league each match seems to be constituted between teams fighting for the impact factor only and the best players can be transferred to other teams who have greater booty. So researchers when they choose a journal to place their papers, usually go for the journal with the highest impact factor first, and then pass down to the lower members of the league with each succeeding rejection.

So when Greg Wilkinson aimed the *British Journal of Psychiatry* for the top international journal spot he was probably thinking of 'international' in the sense of being 'world minus America' as I do not think he was envisaging the journal breaking the dominance of the two main American journals, the *Archives of General Psychiatry* and the *American Journal of Psychiatry*. In some ways

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Figure 1 - Impact factor trend for British Journal of Psychiatry.

this becomes an artificial aim, as in the world league America cannot be ignored. It could be argued that the best and most original papers in psychiatry are published in the two main US journals and so researchers who feel their papers are in this category might wish to choose one of these. As all editors are hoping to publish the best papers they are not going to turn down a paper from a source just because it comes from a different country.

Even when a country tries to be international in its outlook it will always tend to publish more papers from its own country than elsewhere. It is no coincidence that the highest cited papers from the *Archives of General Psychiatry* (Cannon *et al.*, 2008), *American Journal of Psychiatry* (Sanders *et al.*, 2008) and the *British Journal of Psychiatry* (Craddock *et al.*, 2008) all come from their respective countries (even though Sanders *et al.* deals with a European cohort and has 3 Europeans as authors). So when I boast as editor that we are genuinely becoming more international, this is only relative as 54% of our published papers come from the UK (Tyrer, 2009a), and our valiant attempts to publish more papers from low income countries, although doubled in the last few years (Patel & Kim, 2007) are still only at 7%.

So when I am asked 'what does the *British Journal of Psychiatry* stand for, and how does it differ from other psychiatric journals?' I find it difficult to answer. We are

part of a family of psychiatric journals that are all trying to publish good papers and we would all like to think we are fair and honest in selecting the best papers for publication. I first became an assistant editor at the *British Journal of Psychiatry* in 1975 and have puzzled ever since to describe the brand of the journal in an easy way. To a great extent a journal is stamped by its editor and for the *British Journal of Psychiatry* this is aided by the position of the editor as the dictator of publications at the Royal College of Psychiatrists. I hope it is a benign dictatorship but I am far from sure it is good for the College or the Journal. The editor, or Editor-in-Chief, as he has sometimes been called (we have yet to have a female editor but this time is not far off), has the power and scope to follow any path that seems to him to make sense, and there is no requirement to conform to any particular rules. Despite this, the *British Journal of Psychiatry* shows relatively little general change in its publishing outlook. It represents the usual British mix of pragmatism and utility, and three papers I have received in recent years (none accepted for publication) have pointed out that the mix of biological and social psychiatry has remained more or less the same in the Journal for three decades, whereas the proportion varies markedly for the equivalent American journals depending on fashion and enthusiasm. The *Archives of General Psychiatry* is now a special case.

It has always tended to publish more biological articles in psychiatry (Morlino *et al.*, 1997) and now it is moving beyond psychiatry into the basic science of mental health. The original name of the *British Journal of Psychiatry* was the *Journal of Mental Science* (a rather more enduring title than that of the first American journal, the *American Journal of Insanity*) and I think the *Archives of General Psychiatry* is now vying for this epithet.

IMMEDIATE AND LONG-TERM IMPACT

All journal editors now seem to be obsessed by impact, or, more specifically, by various permutations of the impact factor, a curious metric that enables every journal to be put into a league table of apparent excellence with performance measured to three decimal points. The impact factor of a journal is generated by citations to papers in it and is now worshipped almost in the same language as John Keats (1919):

‘The impact factor shalt remain, in midst of other
woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,
‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,-that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.’

So is the impact factor really ‘all ye need to know’ about the status of a journal. No, no, and no again. Citations provide a valuable index of scientific quality but are a rough indication, not a true measure. As Greenberg (2009) puts it, ‘citation is both an impartial scholarly method and a powerful form of social communication. Through distortions in its social use that include bias, amplification, and invention, citation can be used to generate information cascades resulting in unfounded authority of claims’. I only need one example to illustrate this, the notorious paper by Andrew Wakefield *et al.* (1998) (now withdrawn) in the *Lancet* linking autism to mumps, measles and rubella vaccination. To date this has been cited 589 times in the medical journal with the second highest impact factor - does this make it good science?

There are other reasons why the focus on impact factor can be unfair. It is unfair because at present there are more American journals cited in the ISI (Thomson Scientific’s Institute for Scientific Information) than any other country. American journals therefore tend to have higher impact factors irrespective of their relative worth compared with those from other countries. So any journal that wants to raise its impact factor just needs to add a few American members to its editorial board, open an office in the USA,

and publish exactly as before. This tyrant (as Gene Paykel called the impact factor in his paper; Paykel, 2003) also has a very short term focus, as it takes articles which have been cited in the previous two years. The cited half life, a measure of the length of time of which papers go on being cited, is arguably a much better indication of the real value of the paper and this is seldom acknowledged. Systematic reviews are also cited much more often than original papers and this has shown itself conspicuously in psychiatry in the rise of the impact factor of *Schizophrenia Bulletin* in recent years. However, every editor knows that systematic reviews and meta-analyses do not deal with original papers and are entirely derivative. This is not to decry their value but the consequence is that review journals feed off original data published in other journals and benefit excessively by an increase in impact factor. The situation then becomes like a chain of car dealers in which the ones who sell second hand get most of the plaudits.

Yet despite these criticisms we, as yet, have no other comparable index which is better than the impact factor and even though many rail against it and recommend that it should be abandoned completely (eg Bloch & Walter, 2001) it is likely to remain for a little longer yet.

BUSY CLINICIANS AND EARNST RESEARCHERS

It is commonly said that a journal exists for its readers. It seems reasonable and logical but for many journals the pursuit of the impact factor may make them targets only for the researchers who want to publish in the journal with the highest rating. In the case of the *British Journal of Psychiatry* we do have to take much more notice of our readers than many other journals. This is because every member and fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists pays an annual subscription to the College and the monthly delivery of the *British Journal of Psychiatry* represents the most tangible evidence of this. If we alienate our readers we undermine our future, and this represents the best brake against the dictatorship of the psychiatric proletariat by a Stalinist editor. So we publish many papers that do not get cited very frequently, including case reports despite all their deficiencies (Wolpert & Fonagy, 2009), qualitative papers as an important part of the evidence-based psychiatry framework (Tyrer, 2009b), and short reports, which most editors have abandoned. All these reduce the impact factor of a journal but this alone is not a good reason why they should be abandoned, and here I will be guided by my readers, not by an abstract impact number hurtling round the solar system of publication like a threatening asteroid.

SERIOUS AND ENTERTAINING

Learned journals are serious but there is a danger that in doing so they can become pompous and out of touch. I personally have always thought a good journal should entertain also and here I am guided by Thomas Wakley in his aims after founding the *Lancet* in 1823. The three cardinal aims are Wakley were to 'entertain, instruct and reform' and you will note he placed entertainment first, and this comes from a man who three years earlier in 1820 had his house burnt down by a gang and was seriously wounded in the process. He must have had good reason to rant, rail and threaten, but still he placed entertainment first. I believe he did so because entertainment is often the best form of education.

We have therefore introduced an 'extras' feature, with articles, poems, observation and comment on a wide range of psychiatric topics, that we hope entertain as much as educate. So, among other titbits, our contributors have suggested that the Book of Proverbs is the first formal account of personality disorders (Stein, 2008), why borderline personality disorder flummoxes health professionals in 100 words (Holmes, 2009), and exactly how Bram Stoker was influenced by his medical brother, William Thornley, when he wrote *Dracula* (Subotksy, 2009). I have also introduced a monthly column, *From the Editor's Desk*, which is mildly self-indulgent but less scary than *Dracula*. It is also great fun to write, as it allows me to expose my thinking, opinions and warped sense of humour in a useful exercise in transparency for both general readers and potential authors.

In five years' time I expect to see significant changes in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* but I doubt if these will be specific to the Journal. Technological advance has made tremendous strides in the last seven years and by 2015 I suspect everyone will be reading the Journal on their I-phones or their successors long before the yellow journal - yes, I still think it will be yellow - drops through the letter box. Yet I also still hope that receipt of the paper version will led to a warm homely glow, a feeling of being at home in the comfortable accommodating, and ultimately therapeutic, nest of psychiatry (Ranger *et al.*, 2009), where the reader can set aside some time, possibly in the bath in the company of our honorary fellows (Tyrer, 2008b), to indulge in entertainment, instruction and reform.

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