

How much impact has the impact factor?

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When we as authors plan to publish a paper, one major question is in which journal the paper should be published. One aspect of the choice of journals is the impact factor (IF), as indexed in the Journal Citation Reports, which usually serves as a proxy for the relative importance of a journal within its field. For many, it remains unclear how this famous IF is reached and what it actually means. The IF of an academic journal is a measure reflecting the number of citations of articles published in that specific journal. Journals with higher impact factors are considered to be more important than those with lower ones.

How can a journal achieve a higher impact? Of course, the general aim is to publish interesting articles of excellent content and high scientific value that will automatically be of interest and that will be quoted because of scientific impact. These papers will automatically be quoted and raise the IF. In my opinion, this is an ethical and honest method of increasing the IF. However, some journals insist during the final stages of the review process on the addition of 3–5 references that have been published in the journal in question. Introductory words as “in order to improve your article we suggest...” imply the good intentions of the editor. I hope not to be misunderstood—I am very grateful for any genuine suggestions from reviewers and editors that will improve our publication and I

highly appreciate the effort that is involved in the review process. I merely doubt that the paper can be improved just by adding references.

“Massaging the impact factor” may increase the impact factor of a journal, but what does it mean for authors? How much impact does the impact factor have? Our academic system encourages young authors to look out only for the highest impact factors, no matter how these are achieved. This is a questionable system, which probably needs to be changed.

Many other factors are more important than the IF. The first aim should be to produce a paper of good quality, to spread the news amongst an interested readership, to translate scientific results to a broad audience or just to inform our colleagues about outcomes and side effects. This may be international or may be national “only”—national journals often have limited IFs, but they do inform the local community about our work and may have a large impact on our clinical practice. The IF does not really tell you whether the journal is a “good” or a “bad” journal, whether the article is of excellent quality, and whether the scientific value is high or low.

How much impact does the impact factor have? The impact is as powerful as you rate it after reading this editorial. It is an important factor, but I do not think it is the most important factor.

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