

Editorial: Has *TM & IH* entered the top 3 of the tropical medicine journals? Reflections on the journal's unexpected first Impact Factor

Dirk Schoonbaert, Patrick Van der Stuyft and Gilbert Roelants

Institute of Tropical Medicine, Antwerpen, Belgium

Three years ago four journals joined forces to launch *Tropical Medicine & International Health (TM & IH)*, to establish a consolidated European forum for quality papers on tropical medicine and related disciplines (Bradley 1996). In October 1998 *TM & IH* entered the 'tropical medicine journal' listing of the annual *Journal Citation Reports (JCR)* published by the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI 1998) with an impact factor (IF) of 0.980. It is ranked at position 3, after the *American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene* and the *Transactions of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine & Hygiene*, but before all the others in this field, including the four merging journals. Thus in its first appearance in this IF-based listing, *TM & IH* appears to vindicate the prudent hopes expressed by its editors (Van der Stuyft 1996).

This is heart-warming but somewhat surprising news. Technically speaking – IFs are normally calculated by taking the number of citations received within a specific year to papers published in the two previous years, and dividing this figure by the number of papers that were published in those two previous years (Schoonbaert & Roelants 1996). In this respect new journals or mergers would have a structural handicap in that – however, many citations they (or their predecessors) receive during their early history – in principle they cannot receive an IF before they are at least 3 years old. Since *TM & IH* started publishing its first volume in 1996, it is rather surprising that the *JCR* for the year 1997 (published late 1998) actually does list an IF. Apparently, if some threshold is reached, IFs of new journals are calculated based on citations to their first year of publication only. As *TM & IH* published 149 papers during the period 1996, which appear to have been cited 146 times in 1997 it has earned a first IF of 0.980.

So what is one to make of this unexpected impact factor? For one thing, it implies that on average each paper published in *TM & IH* in 1996 was cited about once in 1997 (i.e. not taking into account the citations' obviously skewed distribution and the quantitative limitations of ISI's source

journals collection). But *TM & IH*'s 1997 IF cannot be straightforwardly compared with those of other journals, as both types of IF are not based on the same data set.

For several reasons, the present 0.980 value may turn out to have been an underestimate – one major indication being that in recent *JCR*s the papers in the other tropical medicine journals are invariably cited more often during their third year of publication (e.g. 1995 papers cited in 1997) than during their second year (e.g. 1995 papers cited in 1996). If the citation pattern of *TM & IH* does not deviate strongly from this trend, one may indeed expect a substantial IF increase. Secondly, as *TM & IH* grows older, it becomes better known (partly by being cited) and therefore more likely to attract citations, although for IF purposes only the three most recent years have any influence. Also, the cumulative potential of (self)citable papers continually increases, and as the bimonthly periodicity has changed to a monthly rate, papers are published sooner, which means they can also get cited sooner.

TM & IH has made a convincing entry in the *JCR* with a higher impact factor than any of the four merged journals in their time. An increased IF for 1998 would most probably consolidate our journals place in ISI's tropical medicine journal top 3. Alas – while such growth expectations are far from unreasonable, they remain essentially speculative until the end of 1999.

References

- Bradley D (1996) Change and continuity in tropical medical science and international health. *Tropical Medicine and International Health* 1, 1–2.
- ISI (1998) *Journal Citation Reports on CD-ROM 1997*. Science edn. Institute for Scientific Information, Philadelphia.
- Schoonbaert D & Roelants G (1996) Citation analysis for measuring the value of scientific publications: quality assessment tool or comedy of errors? *Tropical Medicine and International Health* 1, 739–752.
- Van der Stuyft P (1996) Academic excellence and societal influence in the field of tropical medicine and international health. *Tropical Medicine and International Health* 1, 737.