

Editorial

Obtaining an impact factor: mission impossible for *Acta Dermatovenologica Alpina, Pannonica et Adriatica*

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Abstract

Next spring, we will celebrate 30 years since the first issue of *Acta Dermatovenologica Alpina, Pannonica et Adriatica* (*Acta Dermatovenol APA*) was published and, to our astonishment and disappointment, it seems that the goal we have long awaited (and worked hard for)—obtaining an official impact factor (IF)—is nowhere in sight. Every application for an IF has been met with various reasons why our journal does not fulfill the criteria for inclusion in the Science Citation Index Expanded (SCIE). Given the highly non-transparent evaluation process, we conclude that there probably really is no room for small and independent journals in the world of publishing giants and commercial interests. Although disheartened, we will continue our long-established tradition of providing open-access and quality content in dermatology and sexually transmitted infections for researchers and clinicians in the region and worldwide because science should be open and committed to teamwork.

The humble beginnings of *Acta Dermatovenologica Alpina, Pannonica et Adriatica* (*Acta Dermatovenol APA*) date back to 1992, when the journal's founding editor, Aleksej Kansky, decided to launch a platform with the aim of sharing research, discussion, ideas, and experience among professionals and making it possible for young dermatologists from the region to publish manuscripts (1). Our first attempts to apply for an official impact factor (IF) date back to the 2000s. During that time, several regional journals were awarded an official IF, some without even complying with the basic Thomson Reuter's Web of Science criteria, such as publishing in English. Due to the fact that our journal complied with all of the necessary criteria (and more) and did not receive IF at that time, it was clear that the selection process was politically motivated.

To improve its quality and international visibility, *Acta Dermatovenol APA* implemented an online open-access policy, closing the gaps between economically underprivileged professionals and access to science and research. The next major accomplishment occurred in 2005, when the journal achieved full indexing status in Index Medicus/MEDLINE (in addition to EMBASE/Excerpta Medica and Biomedicina Slovenica), with the entire content of the journal available in PubMed (1–3). Since 2012, we have meticulously been monitoring the quality and impact of our journal (i.e., by performing regular citation analyses) and adapting the journal's structure and website in accordance with the modern standards for a European journal (3).

In December 2014, we again began the process of applying for an IF and submitted our journal for evaluation in January 2015, in accordance with the instructions. Because no update was received for several months, we contacted Thomson Reuters and were told that, as a part of their evaluation process, they would be monitoring the next available issues of our journal because the journal's adherence to its publication schedule was their most important criterion. We were told that our journal would be evaluated in the third quarter of 2016 (corresponding to approximately a year and a half since initial submission). After informing Thomson Reuters that three consecutive issues had already been submitted as a proof of the timeliness of our journal at the initial application (which was also a prerequisite for application), we were informed

that they could move the evaluation to the second quarter of 2016 and evaluate our journal for coverage in the new Thomson Reuters Web of Science Core Collection index called the Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI).

It seemed that our diligent work had finally paid off in 2016, on the 25th anniversary of *Acta Dermatovenol APA*, when we were informed that *Acta Dermatovenol APA* had received coverage in ESCI. By receiving coverage in ESCI, an official metric that acknowledges the high publishing standard of a journal, we sincerely believed that we were only one step away from achieving the holy grail in publishing: an official IF. However, as shown in the following paragraphs, this could not be further from the truth.

Again, there were no updates after obtaining coverage in ESCI in 2016, and at the beginning of 2019 we contacted Clarivate (former Thomson Reuters) with questions regarding the ongoing process. Interestingly, this was the first time we were informed that Clarivate does not automatically evaluate ESCI titles for further evaluation, and so we once again scheduled an evaluation for December 2019. In the meantime, one of the Web of Science Editorial Team members actually proved to be very helpful and provided us with clear instructions on sections that needed improvement, despite our journal previously being evaluated as technically sufficient. In accordance with these instructions, we diligently updated our website and provided detailed information on all editorial board members, a clear statement of the commitment to peer review and/or editorial oversight of all published content, and ethical publishing practice. In March 2020, we were informed that our journal had met the quality criteria but not the impact criteria for the Web of Science Core Collection. Specifically, we did not meet the following requirement(s) at the Impact Evaluation step: Comparative Citation Analysis and Content Significance. This came as a surprise because our last published analysis of *Acta Dermatovenol APA* statistics using Elsevier's CiteScore in 2016 showed a CiteScore index value of 0.96, with 48% of articles published in *Acta Dermatovenol APA* between 2013 and 2015 cited at least once in 2016 (4). Moreover, the performance of our journal is even better if the improved Citescore metric for 2020 is used: CiteScore of 1.6 with 244 citations between 2017 and 2020 and 157 published documents, accounting for 47% of articles published between

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2017 and 2020 being cited at least once, ranking 73/117 among dermatology journals (38th percentile) (5). In addition, according to Resurhify, the impact score (calculated as an average number of times documents published in a journal/conference in the past 2 years have been cited in the current year) of our journal is 1.17, with an h-index of 28 and SCImago Journal Rank (SJR) of 0.376 (6). Hence, because the performance statistics of *Acta Dermatovenerol APA* according to both ranking tools are superior to some regional dermatology journals that have already been awarded an IF, such as *Acta Dermatovenerologica Croatica*, such conclusions puzzled us. We are aware that the influence and prestige of articles published in our journal does not match those of the articles published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*. However, even a reasonable IF of 1 could make a difference—potentially, young doctors and researchers would be more interested in publishing their research in independent open-access journals such as *Acta Dermatovenerol APA* because such publications in journals with an IF would presumably be recognized and scored better by their universities and/or employers.

Nevertheless, the story does not end here. Because we were told that ESCI journals could be re-evaluated every 2 years, we approached Clarivate again this year with questions about the status of our journal. To our dismay, we were informed that the Web of Science Editorial team had decided to prioritize re-evaluations for journals that display high citation performance regardless of the time that has passed since their last evaluation, making re-evaluations possible only for ESCI journals that map to Q1 or Q2 of the relevant flagship category. In the correspondence, it was specifically mentioned that other factors, such as stability of publication history and citation activity, are also taken into consideration in selecting journals for re-evaluations. In the next sentence, we were told that *Acta Dermatovenerol APA* does not fulfil the requirement for re-evaluation at this time. If 29 years (plus a couple of months) of regular, quarterly publishing without missing a single issue is not considered “sustainable journal influence,” we cannot imagine what characteristics novel journals with far less

running time should exhibit in order to obtain IF.

Interestingly, academics throughout the globe still heavily rely on IF despite the fact that the metric itself is flawed and can essentially be manipulated (7). Namely, the journal IFs are profoundly influenced by a small number of highly cited papers. For example, 74.8% and 75.5% of articles published in *Nature* and *Science* were shown to be cited well below the journals' IFs of 38.2 and 34.7, respectively (8). Instead, citation-distribution curves may provide much more realistic and informative insight into the journals' standings (8). In addition, there are also several ways to artificially increase the IF, including using the citation potential of a paper as a criterion for acceptance, limiting publications to article types that attract more citations (e.g., special issues and review articles), and encouraging authors and editors to cite the journal irrespective of the relevance.

Moreover, the necessity to publish research in a journal with an official IF as a prerequisite for a successful doctoral dissertation defense has become a worrying trend at an increasing number of universities. Unfortunately, an IF can also be used in one of the most erroneous and potentially dangerous ways: as a measure in deciding on tenure, promotion, and hiring (9). Surprisingly, a recent study (10) showed that 40% of research-oriented universities in Canada and the United States rely on IFs and similar factors when evaluating candidates.

Thus, based on our troublesome experience with the evaluation process for obtaining an official IF for *Acta Dermatovenerol APA* and limitations of the metric, we welcome the formal announcement by Utrecht University to abandon all quantitative bibliometrics, including the IF (11), and we conclude our Sisyphean task with the words of Paul Boselie: “impact factors—as well as a related measure called the *h*-index—contribute to the productification of science that values sheer output over good research” (11).

Our final wish is an honest answer to the painstaking question—have we, “a small journal from a small country” with no support from a major publishing house—ever truly stood a chance of obtaining an official IF?

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