Editorial

Record citations in 2007, but impact factor slips

Through publishing, authors disseminate their work in order that others may see it and act upon it in some way. This is one of the principal ways that the scientific community interacts and exchanges information. It has become increasingly important that the influence of an author’s body of work, or of an individual publication, or of an entire journal somehow be assessed. The importance of such an assessment is viewed differently in different countries, institutions and disciplines and by different individuals. For a number of years the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) has released annual statistics on citations of articles published in previous years in scientific journals. A number of different summary statistics are produced, the most widely discussed being the impact factor. I have used previous editorials to keep readers informed of the most recent statistics for the impact factor. I have calculated that if each paper published in the BJN in 2005 and 2006 was cited just once more than it actually was, the impact factor would have been 3.34! Readers may be interested in the impact factors of our sister journals. For 2007 these were 3.93, 1.89 and 1.86 for Proceedings of the Nutrition Society (ranked 6/56), Nutrition Research Reviews (26/56) and Public Health Nutrition (27/56), respectively.

Table 2 lists the articles published in the BJN during 2005 and 2006 that were most cited in 2007. This Table indicates the importance of review articles and the impact that the articles that a journal publishes will have. Although the articles published in 2005 continue to be cited in 2007, the top ten cited papers from 2005 and 2006 were cited between 13 and 79 times in 2006 (average 25). In contrast, the top nine papers from 2004 and 2005 were cited 9843 times, placing the BJN fifth in the Nutrition and Dietetics category (ranked 6/56), respectively.

One argument against the importance of impact factor in indicating the ‘value’ of a journal is that the time frame over which it is calculated is too short to really reflect the impact that the articles that a journal publishes will have. Thus, alternative measures of article citations are available. These include the total number of citations made to articles published in a journal, and the cited half-life of articles. Table 3 lists the total number of citations made to articles published in the BJN, irrespective of their year of publication, during the years 2000 to 2007. In 2007 articles published in the BJN were cited 9843 times, placing the BJN fifth in the Nutrition and Dietetics category for total citations in 2007. It is apparent that the total number of citations of articles in the journal has increased year-on-year and has increased by almost 85% since 2000. The cited half-life of a journal (Table 3) is the median age of the articles published in that journal that are cited in the reporting year. Thus, publication of articles that remain important (or controversial) long after they are published will result in a long cited half-life. For 2007 Nature, Cell and Science have cited half-lives of 8.0, 8.7 and 8.0 years, respectively. Thus, these journals are publishing articles that are seen as important in the short term, as judged by the high impact factor, but which remain important for many years after publication, as judged by the cited half-life. There may, of course, be other influences on cited half-life. For example, publication of articles of little interest by a journal that in the past has published articles that still remain of interest will result in a long cited half-life.
The cited half-life of the *BJN* for 2007 was 7·1 years, indicating that half of the citations to articles in *BJN* in 2007 were to articles published in 2000 or before. Thus, it seems to me that the *BJN* is publishing articles that are seen as important in the short term, as judged by the reasonably high impact factor (within the journal category), but which remain important for many years, as judged by the cited half-life. For comparison, the cited half-lives for the comparator journals over the period 2001–7 are shown in Table 3. The cited half-lives for *BJN* were 7·7 and 6·5 years, respectively.

The final statistic that is shown in Table 3 is the immediacy index. This is calculated as citations of articles published in the reporting year (for example, 2007) divided by papers published in that same year. It is a measure of how immediately important (or controversial) published papers are. For 2007, the immediacy index of the *BJN* was 0·337. For comparison, the immediacy indexes for the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* and the *Journal of Nutrition* for 2007 were 1·058 and 0·704, respectively.

As I indicated in my previous editorials(2,3), the *BJN* is receiving more submissions and is publishing more articles than ever before. This suggests that the journal is in very good health and is viewed favourably by researchers within the discipline. The communications that I receive suggest that authors want to publish their work in the *BJN*. My aim is to act to improve the impact factor in order that the prestige and attractiveness of the *BJN* are maintained, in the face of mounting competition from other journals, and that its perceived quality is enhanced. This will require a more stringent set of criteria for acceptance of papers and will undoubtedly be unpopular with some authors. However, an improvement in (perceived) quality of the *BJN* will assure its place amongst the top journals in the field and as Editor-in-Chief it is my role to strive for this.
References