

# Medical Journalism

## Section Editor:

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## Call for articles

Dear colleagues,

The majority of medical writers (either in the pharmaceutical industry, CROs, or as freelancers) provide documents for regulatory authorities. A smaller proportion works in the medical and health communication field writing texts for either specialised (e.g. medical doctors) or broader audiences (e.g. patients and other lay people).

In the era of 'Health 2.0', patients are empowered by information to become active and responsible partners in their own health and care pathway<sup>1</sup>. The increasing demand for health and medical information on the web and print media has created a new niche for medical writers: medical journalism.

Medical journalists strive to inform patients and the general public about diseases and treatment options through different mainstream media outlets. These include print media like newspapers, magazines, journals, brochures, leaflets, pamphlets, as well as web-based media like healthcare portals, newsletters, blogs, e-learning, and others. One of the areas experiencing a steady growth lately is medical journalism targeted at scientific journals. Here, the requirements are quite different from those for writing for the general public.

Medical journalism is a multi-tasking profession. It requires the ability to understand complex data,

to filter these data according to (subjective and objective) relevance, and to present them in a format and language tailored at the target audience and medium (whether online or print). In most countries, the profession is not yet legally regulated. This may be a reason why the quality of medical journalism varies greatly.

From 2013 on, the Medical Journalism Column of *Medical Writing* will be focusing on techniques and skills that medical journalists need to do their job, how and where they learn them. In addition, we may report on interesting medical findings reaching the general public through mainstream media.

If you work as a medical journalist or write pieces for patients or other lay people (including children and adolescents), we need your help to transport your experience to the broader medical writers community, exactly in the spirit of Health 2.0. If you want to share your professional experience or write an article on your favourite topic, please contact Diana Raffelsbauer (diana.raffelsbauer@pharmawrite.de).

## Reference

1. Bos L, *et al.* Patient 2.0 empowerment. Proceedings of the 2008 International Conference on Semantic Web & Web Services SWWS08, 2008; pp. 164–167. Available from: [http://www.icmcc.org/pdf/ICMCCS\\_WWS08.pdf](http://www.icmcc.org/pdf/ICMCCS_WWS08.pdf)

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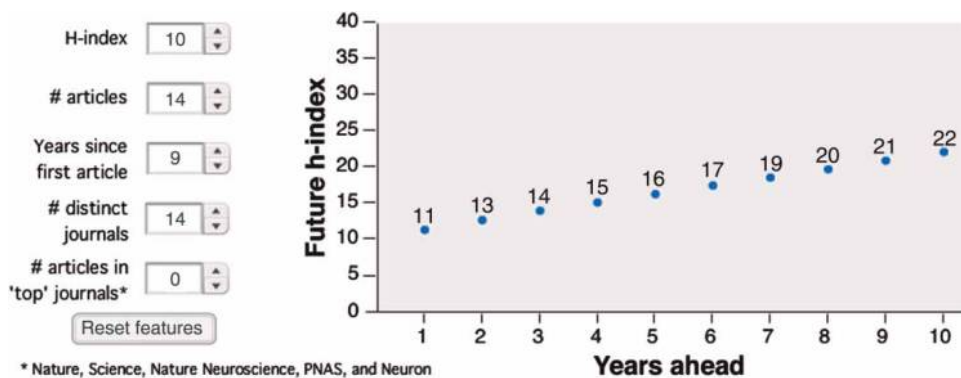


Figure 1: *h*-index prediction for Stephen Carl Gilliver

## Predicting a researcher's future success

Working out who will be a successful researcher in the long term is a problem that continues to vex selection panels responsible for awarding university fellowships. It is widely acknowledged that their decisions are guided by publication metrics (measures), the most (in)famous of which is the impact factor.

The *h*-index<sup>1</sup> is a popular metric that grades a researcher's publication record according to the number of articles they have published and the number of times their articles have been cited. An *h*-index of *n* indicates the publication of *n* articles, each with at least *n* citations. For example, a person who has published 33 articles, each with at least 33 citations, has an *h*-index of 33.

A recent article in *Nature* by Acuna *et al.*<sup>2</sup> presents a new method for predicting future academic output based on a person's record so far. The authors created a set of formulas that estimate a researcher's *h*-index up to 10 years in the future based on the following: (1) current *h*-index; (2) number of articles published; (3) number of years since the first article was published; (4) number of different journals in which the articles were published; and (5) number of publications in 'top journals' (*Nature*, *Science*, *Nature Neuroscience*, *PNAS*, and *Neuron*). The formulas were created using data for neuroscientists, but the authors believe they are 'probably reasonably precise for [other] life scientists'. You can try them out yourself online.<sup>3</sup> Fig. 1 shows the output for me.

The paper by Acuna *et al.* is the subject of a *Nature* editorial,<sup>4</sup> the author(s) of which are clearly prepared for a backlash, inviting anyone who is outraged to 'send complaints to the usual address'. I am not outraged, but I am sceptical.

While Acuna *et al.* show that their formulas predict future *h*-index more accurately than current *h*-index alone does, the formulas were validated using data (for 1995 onwards) for individuals who are current researchers. The formulas would have performed less well if people who were researchers in 1995 had been followed for future output (since a significant proportion of them will have dropped out of research and stopped writing papers). And the assumption remains that number of publications and number of citations are good measures of a researcher's quality. Experience tells me that this is not always the case.

Over-reliance on improved computer-generated metrics would risk researchers' personal qualities being completely overshadowed. Surely nobody wants that.

## References

1. Hirsch JE. An index to quantify an individual's scientific research output. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 2005; 102(46):16569-72.
2. Acuna DE, Allesina S, Kording KP. Future impact: predicting scientific success. *Nature* 2012;489(7415):201-2.
3. H-index prediction. Available from: <http://klab.smpp.northwestern.edu/h-index.html> [accessed 2012 Sep 25].
4. Count on me. *Nature* 2012;489(7415):177.

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