

Ratings of Medical Journals by Family Physician Educators

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A survey asking respondents to rank journals related to medicine and to medical education was sent to a sample of members of the Society of Teachers of Family Medicine to determine the prestige value of those journals. The participants were asked to rank from a list of more than 75 different medical and nonmedical journals those they considered to be among the top ten. The results indicate that a relatively small number of journals were ranked by the respondents. Six journals were designated as most prestigious by members of the Society of Teachers of Family Medicine: *The Journal of Family Practice*, *The New England Journal of Medicine*, *American Family Physician*, *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, *Annals of Internal Medicine*, and the *Journal of Medical Education*. There was general agreement as to the value of certain journals regardless of participant's work area or major academic interest.

Medical education exists in an era of decreasing federal and state budgetary support and increasing expectations for faculty members to improve their productivity in certain academic areas. There is great concern on the part of administrators and faculty members with research and the publication of results. In fact, the reward system of many institutions is tied to these academic pursuits. For example, promotion and tenure guidelines for most departments typically state that advancement and other rewards should be based principally on these scholarly efforts,¹ resulting in a proliferation of research, review, and position papers. The value of research and of publication is demonstrated by the high rankings of these activities by department chairmen and by faculty members.² Yet, there are few standards to permit some evaluation of these scholarly efforts. One approach is to determine the attitudes of a discipline toward the value of publishing in that field and use those

perceptions as a basis for determining the value of publication in related journals.³

This study was designed to investigate the prestige value of journals relevant to the field of family medicine. It was intended to determine whether this perceived value was a function of the work setting and the areas of interest of members of the Society of Teachers of Family Medicine (STFM). The interest areas corresponded to those commonly associated with the discipline of family medicine (ie, medical education, geriatrics, general internal medicine, behavioral medicine, preventive medicine, and pediatrics). The work settings were those commonly associated with teaching programs in family practice, that is, programs located in university and community settings. The study was also an attempt to gain insight into the range of journals considered to be prestigious by STFM members.

Methods

A list of 81 journals was compiled from suggestions made by several Department of Family Prac-

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tice faculty members at the Medical College of Georgia, from examination of the *Citation Index*, and from *Index Medicus*. The author decided to use, as the respondent sample, members of the Society of Teachers of Family Medicine. It was felt that members of this association would be familiar with the many medical journals available and could determine those that were of most value to persons in academic family medicine. The sample consisted of 500 STFM physician members randomly selected from the 1981 STFM directory. Using random techniques, every fourth name was selected with the proviso that the respondent must have a Doctor of Medicine degree. If, through the random selection process, a nonphysician was chosen, the next name on the list was selected and the process continued.

The respondents were asked to complete a form that gave some biographical information (eg, they were asked whether they were based in a university or a community hospital). Furthermore, they were asked to identify the one area other than family medicine that most nearly corresponded to their professional interests; professional interests listed were geriatrics, behavioral medicine, general internal medicine, pediatrics, preventive medicine, medical education, and medical research. There was also room on the form for the respondent to specify some other area of interest. The respondents were asked to complete the following task:

On the next page, please indicate those journals that you consider to be among the top ten—in other words, those journals in which you would most like to be published or those in which you would expect to find material important to you as an educator of family physicians. Indicate a numerical rank on the blank to the left of the journal title, using the numeral "1" next to the journal you consider best, "2" next to the journal you consider to be second best and so on until you have ranked ten journals. If journals that you consider to be among the top ten are not listed, enter their titles in the blank lines at the bottom of the list, and rank them using the same criteria. The journals are listed in alphabetical order and are abbreviated according to *Index Medicus*.

These instructions were slightly modified from those used by Luce and Johnson.⁴ Some journals relevant to family medicine were not included in the list, but were expected to be listed by the respondents.

Results

Of the 500 questionnaires sent, 243 respondents provided useful data. The response rate was determined to be approximately 49 percent. Thirty-nine percent of the respondents identified their primary location as being university based, while 61 percent designated community based.

In addition to the 81 journals listed in the questionnaire, a total of 98 other journals was written in by the respondents. The overall journal rankings were determined as the absolute number of times a journal was ranked in the top ten. Total rankings of the top journals in this study are shown in Table 1.

Discussion

The results indicate that journal prestige varies little in regard to interest area and work location. Specifically, there were few instances in which journals were not ranked in the top ten within each professional interest area included in the study. For example, there was virtually complete agreement among those indicating medical education as their major interest, the exception being the inclusion of *Lancet* in the top ten for those in university settings as opposed to *Postgraduate Medicine* for those in community settings. The interest area that had the most disagreements was behavioral medicine, in which six journals were included in the top ten by both groups and four different journals each for the two work settings.

The following six journals were included in the top rankings for all seven interest groups: *The Journal of Family Practice*, *The New England Journal of Medicine*, *American Family Physician*, *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, *Annals of Internal Medicine*, and the *Journal of Medical Education*.

This list of journals seemed to be relatively constant across major interest area and work setting. It appears as though the prestige rating of journals by the members of the Society of Teachers of Family Medicine is rather consistent. This degree of consensus may be a cause for concern in regard to the variety of information being shared or transmitted. It could indicate that the cross-fertilization of ideas among members of the Society of Teachers of Family Medicine, as far as journal prestige ranking is concerned, is limited. It is interesting to note that the prestige ranking of jour-

Table 1. Rankings of Medical Journals by Members of The Society of Teachers of Family Medicine

Rank	Journal	Number of Times Ranked in Top Ten
1	Journal of Family Practice	198
2	New England Journal of Medicine	188
3	American Family Physician	173
4	Journal of the American Medical Association	168
5	Annals of Internal Medicine	95
6	Journal of Medical Education	90
7	Postgraduate Medicine	79
8	Patient Care	71
9	Continuing Education for the Family Physician	50
10	Lancet	40

nals was concentrated into fewer than 25 journals.

Even though there were opportunities to do so, the respondents failed to rank journals outside strictly medical areas. Even those persons who indicated their major interest was in medical education failed to rank journals outside the field of medicine, with the exception of the *Journal of Medical Education*. Those who indicated a special interest in behavioral medicine did not rank journals from a breadth of disciplines.

These observations raise several questions related to scholarly interests pursued by those charged with providing education for medical students and residents. For example: To what extent should medical educators go outside their discipline to gain insights into the nature of teaching and learning and the many aspects pertaining thereto? To what extent should medical educators, especially those involved in family medicine education, look toward journals from outside the medical field to gain these insights? To what extent should the fields of anthropology, sociology, economics, psychology, and education be pursued? It should be recognized also that there are limits to the amount of time medical educators can devote to "secondary" disciplines and yet maintain the expertise that is demanded of their own discipline.

In times of economic stress, with resources decreasing or leveling off and increased expectations for faculty productivity for promotion and tenure,⁵ it becomes important that standards be set for determining precise expectations of faculty mem-

bers, including the types of publications that are acceptable. More studies such as this need to be conducted to provide a basis for the development of such guidelines. As Reynolds states, "It is reasonable for a faculty member to want to understand what is expected of him by those who are judging his performance."⁶

This study has provided information concerning the prestige rankings of journals by members of the Society of Teachers of Family Medicine. It has shown that there is a concentration of prestige ranking, and presumably readership, among a relatively narrow range of journals. The study provides insights into the prestige attached to these journals by the members of the society and raises some philosophical questions pertaining to promotion and tenure within the discipline of academic family medicine. This study also provides some guidance for determining the prestige of articles published in the medical literature for family physician educators.

References

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