

Editorial

Impact Factors and the *Journal of Food Protection*

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Each year journal editors and authors eagerly await the publication of *impact factors*. The impact factor is the ratio of articles cited in the scientific literature that were published in a journal to the number of articles published by the journal during a specified time period, usually the previous 2 and 5 years. Research papers that are often cited are considered to have a high impact in their field because other researchers are using the findings to plan new research and/or to interpret their results. Of course, all journals want to publish such papers. Many journal editors consider impact factors a “report card” indicating the significance of the journal to the research community. Authors want the journals in which they publish to have high impact factors because their employers and colleagues consider acceptance of manuscripts in these journals to be a sign of excellence. Impact factors have a legitimate claim as an indicator of journal quality since the nature of scientific progress has always been that current research builds upon past findings. Therefore, the impact factor is considered an indicator of the extent to which a journal is publishing manuscripts that contribute to scientific progress.

As an Editor for the *Journal of Food Protection*, I am congratulated by authors when the journal impact factor increases. When it decreases, I am asked to explain why the quality of the *Journal* is declining. I explain to the author that I am not concerned about fluctuations in this statistic, as it may not be a good indicator of how well the *Journal* is fulfilling its mission. For example, the mission of the International Association for Food Protection is “To provide food safety professionals worldwide with a forum to exchange information on protecting the food supply.”

The *Journal of Food Protection* is one means by which IAFP implements this mission. The *Journal* subjects submitted manuscripts to a peer review process so that our readers have confidence that the information we publish is valid, useful, and makes a significant contribution to food protection. The ultimate reason for the *Journal's* existence is to provide information to food safety professionals that they can use to provide a safer and better-quality food supply. Many *JFP* articles that improve food industry processes and practices or contribute to food policy development may not produce citations that contribute to our impact factor, but they are the very reason for the *Journal's* existence. For example, pathogen surveys in certain foods or various approaches for pathogen control may result in articles that may not be highly cited. Such data, however, may have sufficient significance to food protection that they should be published. Food safety issues in less developed countries often merit research and, if the results are sufficiently significant, the data published, so that problems and potential solutions can be communicated. However, such articles also do not generate numerous citations.

The overemphasis on impact factors by research administrators is primarily because they are quantitative and readily available, not because they are the most appropriate metric to use. In fact, many research institutions have recently adopted alternatives to the journal impact factor as a means to evaluate research quality. We want to assure our readers that the primary mission of *JFP* will continue to be to serve as the major tool for scientists to communicate significant findings to the community of food safety professionals.