To the Editor—We recently reviewed all P values extracted from all original articles in Volume 12 (2006) of Hong Kong Medical Journal (HKMJ). Three hundred and sixty-seven P values were extracted from 30 papers with statistical analysis. Of these, 18 (4.9%) were zero, 11 (3.0%) were stated as “P=NS”, 57 (15.5%) presented with insufficient precision (i.e., no exact P value when P>0.001, e.g., P<0.05, P>0.05) and one (0.3%) was probably printing error (as P=0001).

Reporting P value as P>0.05 or P=NS is not acceptable because interpreting P values should be flexible. Fisher¹ suggested that P values around 0.05 might lead to neither belief nor disbelief in the null hypothesis but to a decision to replicate the experiment. It is also theoretically impossible to have P=0.

The current version of information for authors of the HKMJ stated that “the statistical guidelines of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) should be followed”. However, ICMJE² only vaguely mandated the authors to “describe statistical methods with enough detail to enable a knowledgeable reader with access to the original data to verify the reported results”. Statistical guidelines for contributors to medical journals by Altman et al³ stated that the exact P value should be presented unless the P value was less than 0.0001. Nonetheless, the generally accepted practice is to report exact P value when the P value is larger than 0.001.⁴

We would suggest HKMJ to adopt a set of clearer statistical guidelines and encourage the contributors to report and interpret confidence intervals instead of relying solely on P value.⁵

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References