The fat lady sings: results of the 2007 Readers Survey

Benjamin Disraeli, Queen Victoria's favorite prime minister, said, according to American humorist Mark Twain, "There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics". Among the usual suspects of statistical illusion must rank opinion polls (used by politicians) and reader surveys (used by editors).

So, what is the point of our "2007 Readers Survey"? The last time we did it, 5 years ago, it attracted a paltry 2.8% response rate. What could we have expected to gain this time?

Thankfully, this time we have gained much more. For a start, the response rate has not only jumped to 6.8%; it has comfortably exceeded the sample size required for categorical data for this Journal's print readership of 6000.[1]

Reader profile

Approximately half of our respondents are from the public sector, a third from the private sector, and a tenth from the academic sector. Five years ago the public to private ratio was exactly the reverse. Maybe because an increasing number of young doctors are qualifying as Fellows, the majority of our readers are now from the public sector. Our readers are getting busier too – only 10% of respondents spend more than 2 hours on each issue, compared with 26% previously.

Paper quality

Fifty-five percent rate our papers good or excellent for scientific content, which is hardly different from the 52% found previously. As for editorial quality, a gratifying 71% gave us such approval. Our predecessors were too modest to have asked the same question.

What readers like

Of nine categories of papers, our respondents are most interested, by a wide margin, in the review articles and original articles. Case reports, editorials, and medical practice are somewhat less popular. Pictorial medicine, letters, and the "back page" – the softer side of this Journal – are squarely put on the back burner.

Where to improve

Original articles, despite their popularity, are rated as the category most in need of improvement, followed at a distance by medical practice and case reports. The remaining six categories seem to attract equally little demand for upgrading.

Do we want to have an Impact Factor?

An Impact Factor (IF) is a score given by an international organisation (ISI Web of Knowledge) which computes the number of times articles in a given journal are cited in indexed journals against the number of "citable items" (usually articles or reviews, not editorials or letters) that journal publishes. As IQ is to the 'intelligence' of a child, the IF enjoys unsurpassed, if not untainted, status as a measure of the 'impact' of a journal. For many journals lacking an international following, the IF is less than 1.

We asked our readers whether they would be more or less inclined to submit an article to this Journal if by joining the ISI we obtain an IF of less than 1. Two-thirds said it makes no difference; 22% said more and 9% less.

Our website

This Journal is an 'open-access' journal, which means anyone can type in www.hkmj.org to access our contents and download them at will. In addition to many standard features, this website also contains our entire archives which can be thoroughly searched. Among our respondents, 56% have visited the website and just over half of them thought it was good or excellent.

What's the point?

There is no safety in numbers. If 70% of respondents praise us, that means 30% are not going to. And what about the 93% of potential readers who did not participate in the survey?

Perhaps the most important message I have learned from the survey is that this Journal must not stray from its chosen path. Our core business is to publish good scientific articles for the medical community of Hong Kong. It ain't over until that becomes our recognised tradition.

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Reference

1. Cochran WG. Sampling techniques. 3rd ed. New York: John Wiley & Sons; 1977.

Results of Readers Survey

Year	2007	2002
Questionnaires returned	6.8%	2.8%
Respondents		
HKAM Fellows : Non-Fellows	3.2 : 1	–
HA or DH	53%	37%
Private practice	33%	50%
University	11%	4%
Submitted papers to HKMJ		–
None	48%	
1-2 times	33%	
3-5 times	14%	
>5 times	5%	
Reading habit		
0-5 min	7%	–
6-60 min	67%	27% (<1 hr)
1-2 hrs	16%	44%
>2 hrs	10%	26%
Paper quality		
Scientific content		(General quality)
Excellent	4%	5%
Good	51%	47%
Average	43%	41%
Below average	2%	3%
Editorial quality		–
Excellent	7%	
Good	64%	
Average	27%	
Below average	1%	
Paper categories	(points, max. 100)	
Most interested in		Review articles, followed by Original articles and Editorials
Review articles	60	
Original articles	59	
Case reports	38	
Editorials	37	
Medical practice	35	
Needing improvement		Review articles, followed by Original articles
Original articles	30	
Medical practice	20	
Case reports	20	
Impact factor (IF)		
Likelihood of submission if IF <1		–
More likely	22%	
No difference	67%	
Less likely	9%	
HKMJ website		
Visited last 6 months		12% visited in last 3 months
None	43%	
1-2 times	33%	
3-5 times	16%	
>5 times	7%	
Rating		
Excellent	4%	
Good	49%	
Average	45%	
Below average	2%	