Expanding Options for Scientific Publication

Is More Always Better?

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Using a creative and original methodology, Fosbøl et al1 document in the December 11, 2012, issue of Circulation that approximately one third of abstracts presented at the annual meetings of the American Heart Association, the American College of Cardiology, and the European Society of Cardiology result in a published peer-reviewed manuscript within 2 years. In addition, Fosbøl and colleagues report that compared with abstracts presented at either the American College of Cardiology or the European Society of Cardiology meetings, those presented at the American Heart Association meeting are more likely to result in a peer-reviewed print publication within 2 years and are more likely to appear in journals with a higher citation index. Consistent with shifting attendance rates over the past decade, the authors further document that the European Society of Cardiology meeting has surpassed the American College of Cardiology meeting with respect to eventual publication, but that the American Heart Association meeting, with its greater emphasis on basic as well as translational science, remains the meeting of choice for cardiovascular investigators worldwide. As shown in related work in this arena, factors associated with a higher likelihood of subsequent publication included basic research, prospective study design, and randomized trials.2 Though not discussed in detail, the data from Fosbøl and colleagues3 also document what editors know to be true, that an increasing share of the world’s scientific literature is proportionally coming from Europe, Asia, and South America.

Most of these findings, elegantly documented by Fosbøl and colleagues,1 will not surprise those who have followed research trends over the past 20 years. In their discussion, however, the authors suggest that the eventual full-length publication of only 1 in 3 abstracts is far from ideal and that the clinical and scientific communities would be better served if all data were published and as rapidly as possible.

We are not so sure.


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There is nothing inherently wrong about publishing reports that are rarely if ever cited. After all, even a single case report may be highly valuable to a physician faced with a complex but rare patient, just as a unique scientific observation that is unpopular or runs against the status quo may be subject to considerable publication bias. Yet as the data cited by Dr Garfield indicate, these exceptions are unlikely to be the case for the great majority of rarely or never cited publications that nonetheless consume considerable time and expense from reviewers, editors, and publishers. Thus, although Fosbøl and colleagues believe 1 in 3 abstracts reaching print publication is far too few, some may believe it is already too many. Others, like Goldilocks, may consider it just about right.

What investigators and editors seek is quality, and that has not changed since March 1665, when the editors of the Philosophical Transaction of the Royal Society, the first journal exclusively devoted to science, struggled over what to include, what to exclude, and what standards for review might be. Within academia, the criteria underlying publish or perish have shifted from discussions of how many to how important, a change widely applauded. Our instincts are that the 20th century minimalist architect Ludwig Meis van der Rohe got it right by proclaiming, “Less is more,” an issue worth considering in a scientific era increasingly dominated by social media and instant availability rather than considered and careful analysis.

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References

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