Editorial

Int Arch Allergy Immunol 1995;106:1-2

Why Citations – and How?

G. Wick

Innsbruck

At the time this issue is distributed to our readers, I can look back on three years as Editor-in-Chief of International Archives of Allergy and Immunology. This task involved the processing of a large number of manuscripts, weekly editorial meetings, scientific and administrative correspondence, including solving sometimes rather vexing problems. All my endeavours to make our Journal an exciting and solid source of information at the junction of theoretical and clinical allergology and immunology have been continuously and efficiently supported by our Managing Editor as well as the Boards of Associate and Advisory Editors and the competent staff at the scientific and administrative secretariats in Innsbruck and at the Karger publishing house in Basel, respectively. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all colleagues and collaborators who have helped to achieve this goal. Special thanks go to our many Reviewers, who have given both their time and expertise to constantly improve the quality of our Journal. A list of their names appears in this issue in acknowledgement of their commitment.

With respect to our continuous efforts to improve manuscript processing it has given me satisfaction that publication time has again been significantly shortened, especially when no major revision was required. On the administrative side, we guarantee processing of incoming manuscripts, i.e. selection of a responsible Associate Editor and mailing of the paper to her/him, on the same day! I hope that our readers also appreciate my selection and composition of motives for the colored front page of International Archives, where we try to alternate theoretical and clinical as well as allergologic and immunologic topics. As a matter of fact, it is always fun to put together these pictures, and I would like to invite our readers to make their own suggestions in this respect, too. Besides original papers, the elaborate Reviews, Mini-Reviews, Controversies and occasional Commentaries were well received by our readership. Unfortunately, our offer to publish interesting Case Reports has not yet been as widely accepted as we hoped. However, those Case Reports that appeared during the last year have aroused great interest, sometimes even reflected in the international lay press, such as the report on immuno-pathological complications in two babies breast-fed by mothers with silicone mammary prostheses [1]. We hope to receive more Case Reports in the future to make this a regular section in all issues of the Journal. Finally, as an Editor-in-Chief, one also tries to learn from the policies of other journals. Thus, I always enjoy the ‘Images in Clinical Medicine’ that appear regularly in the New England Journal of Medicine, and we will try to follow this lead by publishing single-page allergologic and immunologic illustrations with a self-explanatory short legend several times a year. Another improvement will be the inclusion of central folders with schematic representations of topics of current interest, elaborate nomenclature tables, etc., following the layout used, e.g., by Immunology Today.
As mentioned in previous Editorials, being the Editor-in-Chief of a Journal, especially of such an old and well-established publication as International Archives, also involves a tremendous learning process in scientific, as well as non-scientific terms. The Editor-in-Chief undoubtedly has the power to shape the content and style of a Journal and cannot avoid giving it his personal touch. Among the many different pieces of the puzzle that gives a Journal its final scope and appearance, I would like to discuss only one in this Editorial, i.e., the ‘Culture of Citation’.

As Editor-in-Chief, I admit to have rather strong feelings with respect to the mode of citing previous work. My attitude is in part based on the way I was trained by my teachers and mentors, notably the late Ernest Witebsky, Department of Microbiology and Immunology, State University of New York at Buffalo, and on my age, that places me between the older generation committed to classical approaches to immunological problems and the young, ‘eager beavers’ looking only forward without caring about the foundations their expertise is built upon. I firmly believe that original work relevant to the contents of a given manuscript, even if performed years ago, should be given proper credit, rather than citing more recent reviews by authors who have contributed only marginally to the area in question. Exceptions to this rule are, of course, reviews written by scientists who were also involved in the original work or made major contributions in this field later on. Furthermore, I insist – at least in our own group – that cited work should also have been read by the authors. Finally, I feel that original work should be cited irrespective of the standing of the Journal in which it was published, since this often does not really matter with respect to the originality and importance of the discovery in question. In fact, in my own research, I was often decisively influenced by work that appeared in less well known Journals. A good example for this statement is the first description of rheumatoid factors by Felix Milgrom [2] – incidentally one of the previous Editors-in-Chief of International Archives – that has later been ‘rediscovered’ several times and described in papers published in more prestigious journals that are now generally cited as the original discovery. I consider it as one of my duties as an Editor-in-Chief to propagate accurate, fair and appropriate citations.

While preparing this Editorial, I made an ad hoc inhouse poll with regard to the problem of citing references. I asked for brief statements referring to the questions: ‘Should references be given at all? If yes, why, and how should references be cited? What are the criteria for selecting certain references and omitting others?’

The answers were quite revealing and – as expected – differed considerably with the scientific standing and age of the respondents. All persons who responded mainly agreed that citations were necessary. Common reasons for this attitude were:
Reference to methods and thus shortening of their description;
Promoting basic knowledge of previous work to the reader that can then be alluded to only briefly;
Providing arguments for and against one’s own position, thus allowing for critical discussion of the results presented;
Rounding up a paper and giving it a more ‘scientific profile’;
Reference (hence the designation) to pioneering ideas and achievements;
Practical and political viewpoints, such as consideration of potential reviewers, citation and thus propagation of own work, also in order to obtain grants, retrieval from a pool of papers that are stored in the ‘reference manager’ of the authors’ computer, etc...
Older scientists tend to refer to original work, as they have often closely followed it from a contemporaneous standpoint or even participated in it personally. They also tend to cite their teachers and mentors. Young investigators often do not care about their foundations, but rather consider original older work – if they are familiar with it at all – as ‘ballast on their way up’.

Citation out of politeness, i.e. similar to a friendly greeting that serves to play down potential aggression of colleagues in the very competitive profession of research.

One colleague made an interesting statement that deserves some comment: He suggested that citation should be ranked according to the quality (impact factor) of the journal where these references were published. However, by doing so he would actually prevent many of his own (excellent) papers from being cited, if other authors followed this recommendation.

Finally, several statements included the suggestion to intensify the endeavours of Journals’ Editors to standardize the format of citations.

I am, of course, aware that these remarks are made from a very personal viewpoint, and the opinions of our readers with respect to this very controversial and sensitive issue would be highly welcome and may constitute the basis for another Editorial discussion.

References

Wick
Editorial