



Journal of Hepatology: The Home of Liver Research, 2015–2019

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As we come to the end of our term in charge of *Journal of Hepatology*, we are left with mixed emotions. On the one hand, we are very proud of where we find the Journal today, having increased its impact factor from 10.4 to 18.9, an 81% increase. On the other, we are left with a sense that we were not able to accept some fantastic papers that were submitted to us. As this team took charge of the Journal, the main vision that we agreed to deliver on was “to build on the Journal of Hepatology's impressive growth and progress its impact factor, while improving the quality of papers, especially in basic science, and increasing its geopolitical influence.” Importantly, we also agreed that the Journal had to have an equitable and transparent publication process, in which the editors were accountable. We also needed to ensure that we focused on the quality of science and, as far as possible, the reproducibility of articles published in the Journal. In this Editorial we will reflect on how this team has performed against what we promised to deliver.

The organizational structure: delivering on the aims Selection of Editors

In order to achieve the stated aims, we departed somewhat from the structure used in most liver journals by “federalizing” the Journal. We wanted to build the Journal on the principle that the editors need to be accountable for the papers published and that the reviewers would provide guidance to the editors rather than deciding whether an article was acceptable or not. The section in each issue, ‘From the Editor's Desk’ was developed with this idea in mind, to reflect on the original papers that each of the Senior Editors had accepted.

We recognized that Hepatology has evolved into a huge medical and scientific field with many complexities that are

regularly changing in every subject area. Therefore, it was clear that we required experts in each respective field to understand the importance of submitted articles. Thus, four ‘Senior Editors’, who were experts in each of the major topics in Hepatology, were chosen. Traditionally, *Journal of Hepatology* had been considered a little weak on basic science. Therefore, as one of the stated aims of the new team, we strengthened the translational and basic science of the Journal by appointing Jessica Zucman-Rossi (also cancer) and Sophie Lotersztajn, who joined Thomas Berg (viral hepatitis) and Ramon Bataller (alcohol and fatty liver disease). The Associate Editor base was also expanded (from 24 in the previous team to 45), which brought a wider expertise into the editorial team. Although this was initially seen as potentially problematic, it allowed the authors of papers to trust that we had the expertise needed to review their papers.

The Journal office and relationship with EASL GB

Unlike many other journals, the *Journal of Hepatology* is owned by EASL and, therefore, its funding and governance requires close interactions with the EASL Governing Board (GB) and the EASL Office. One of the main reasons behind the success of the Journal was the relative autonomy of the Journal office, which was led by Joël Walicki. EASL always appreciated the Journal's importance in the organization and therefore, within reason, provided it with extremely generous support, appointing graphic designers, copywriters and other technical staff. The excellent working relationship with Elsevier contributed immensely to the seamless process from submission to publication. This structure gave us the ability to audit the pathway repeatedly, allowing us to improve the Journal continuously.

Your Paper, Your Way

When the current team started, the Journal was in the 5th place amongst its peers, which meant that many of the excellent papers would be cascaded to us if they were unsuitable for the higher impact journals. Therefore, we aimed to create a mechanism by which the authors would find it easy to submit their papers – formatted for other journals with higher impact factors – to us, rather than to other journals, without having to spend too much time and energy on reformatting the paper.

Keywords: Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease; miRNA; Expression profile; Diagnostic accuracy.

Received 25 September 2019; accepted 25 September 2019

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Editorial

This, coupled with the realization that we were rejecting over 90% papers, led to the introduction of this innovation, referred to as ‘Your Paper, Your Way’ in which we were able to review the paper in whatever format the author was able to send it to us. This experiment has been hugely successful.

Focus on improving look, feel and readability

The Journal office made a considerable effort to improve the readability of the Journal, as the editorial team felt that this is crucial in making sure that the authors feel their paper has the visibility it deserves, and the reader enjoys the experience of reading the articles. The fonts and layout have been changed and different sections color coded to allow the reader to get to the correct place quickly. The quality of the artistry on the cover page, the figures and the graphical abstract are particularly appealing as they can be lifted by the readers and used in their presentations. The titles, abstracts and articles, particularly the reviews, benefit from in-depth editing by an in-house expert.

Journal metrics

Over the past 5 years, this team has received 10,094 original papers of which 1,054 were sent for revision and 970 were finally accepted (9.6%). Some hallmarks of the senior team’s performance are illustrated in Table 1. As can be seen, all the editors performed at the same level. Remarkably this outstanding performance was not “by-design” but the result of a structural appreciation by members of the senior editorial team of what constitutes a good paper for the Journal.

As mentioned in our opening statement, during our tenure the impact factor increased from 10.4 to an outstanding 18.9. This is an impressive result that goes beyond our more enthusiastic expectations. As can be seen in Fig. 1, while the whole field of Gastroenterology and Hepatology grew for the past 5 years the *Journal of Hepatology* clearly outperformed its main competitors and is now competing directly with the Gastro journals.

While cognizant of the inherent flaws of a metric like the impact factor, we are convinced that its increase reflects the improved quality of articles published by the Journal. This can be seen in the graph that we have come to call “fat in the middle” (Fig. 2). Here the curve is moving higher every year, meaning our manuscripts are being cited more often, suggesting that the Journal is more robust and does not rely on only a few highly cited manuscripts for its impact factor. This development is something that we are particularly proud of. In addition, the increase of the impact factor has been accompanied by an increase in other metrics like the CiteScore and SciMago, the number of downloads and the overall usage on all platforms where the Journal is hosted.

Five years ago, the expectation was that research on viral hepatitis would decline and everything around metabolic diseases would grow massively. Reality turned out to be more

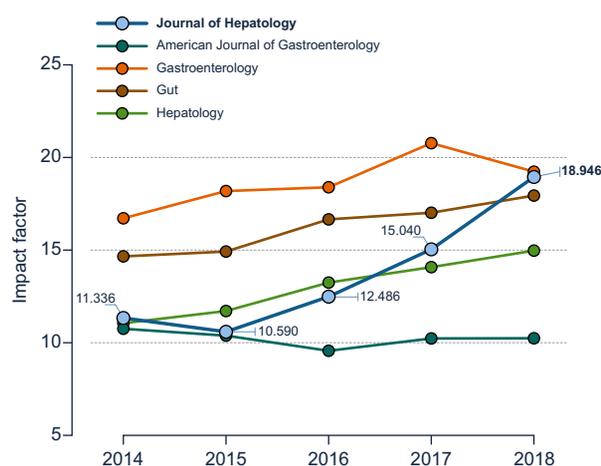


Fig. 1. Evolution of impact factor of *Journal of Hepatology* and its main competitors. The figure shows that the rate increase of impact of the *Journal of Hepatology* over the past 5 years has been greater than its main competitors.

complex. As can be seen in Fig. 3, there was indeed an increase in the proportion of metabolic papers, but it was not as marked as expected. Importantly, articles on viral hepatitis have remained as important a contributor to the Journal as for previous teams. Interestingly, the number (and the quality) of basic science articles increased considerably. This was likely the result of our decision to allow a larger number of figures per article (8 vs. 4 previously) and the higher profile given to the subject.

The origin of the articles reflects current and long-term trends in the research world. We saw an increase in publications from China and South Korea, which mirrors their increased scientific standing. Interestingly, we also noticed an increase in the number of publications from the USA, which is likely the result of a change in perception of the Journal and its increasing global influence. Finally, the number of submissions coming from Europe decreased slightly, possibly reflecting current trends in research funding on the continent Fig. 4.

From the moment we took over the management of the Journal, we decided that we could not stay in our academic bubble and needed to reach out to patients and lay individuals. To this end, we have introduced the “lay summaries” that are meant to describe the results of each accepted article in lay terms. In the following years we went a step further and created a “lay version” of our table of contents, which included the lay summaries and graphical abstracts. These changes have been well received by patient communities.

In 2015, we started generating press releases for papers deemed worthy of extra promotion. Since the beginning, about 30 press releases were generated or promoted. The program has been very successful, increasing the profile of the Journal in the

Table 1. Summary of editors’ performance.

	Ramon Bataller	Thomas Berg	Sophie Lotersztajn*	Jessica Zucman-Rossi	Rajiv Jalan
No. of assignments with decision	2,121	2,364	360	2,466	2,420
Proportion of articles handled	22%	24%	4%	25%	25%
Acceptance rate	8%	10%	6%	8%	9%
In-house rejection rate (no peer review)	63%	65%	77%	66%	57%
Turn-around time	14.6	14.4	13.4	15.4	16.1

* Since May 2018.

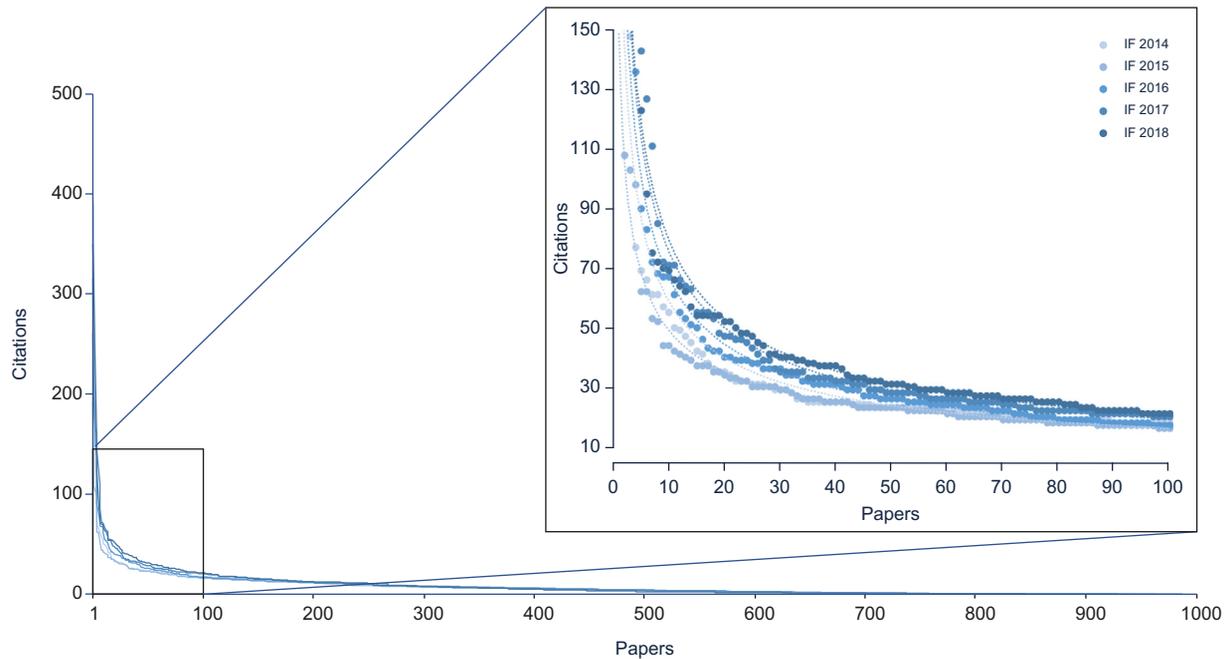


Fig. 2. “Fat in the middle”. This figure shows that more papers are cited more often, year-on-year suggesting that the dramatic increase in the impact factor is due to this improvement in the quality of the journal rather than a few highly cited papers.

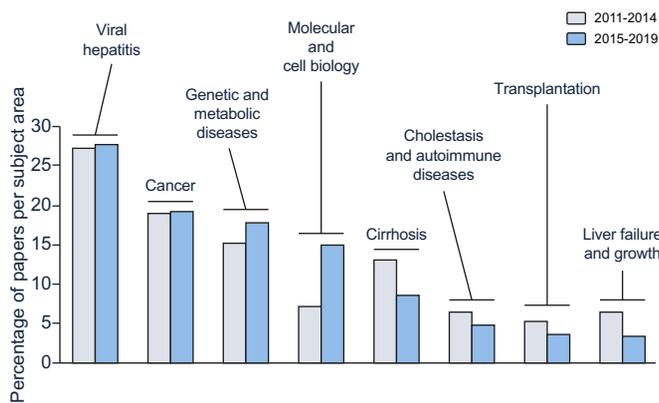


Fig. 3. Changes in the types of articles published. This figure describes the papers in different subject areas published by the current team (2015–2019) compared with that of the previous team (2011–2014). It confirms almost doubling of the publication of the basic science papers.

general media and bringing attention to the authors of the highlighted manuscripts. We believe that bringing issues of public interest to a lay audience serves to drive public opinion and awareness of the importance of liver disease.

Transparency and reproducibility

Appointment of Senior Editor

An important decision of the editorial team was to create a new post, that of a Senior Editor, a role performed by Prof. Richard Moreau. This role was primarily to provide the Journal with support on governance, by assessing the conflicts of interest of both authors and editors. He had access to all the decisions that were being made and also the process by which reviews were being conducted. An important role was to ensure that we followed a transparent and fair pathway. This was based on the idea that despite our best efforts, we were likely to get decisions wrong in about 10–15% of cases. The role of the Senior Editor was to

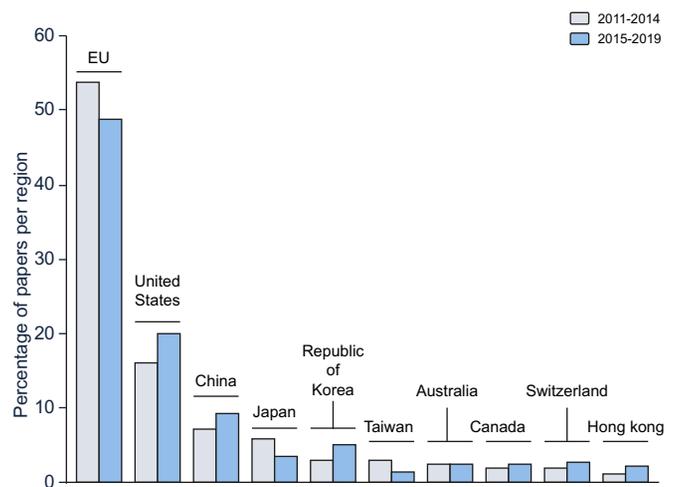


Fig. 4. Geopolitical influence of the Journal. This figure shows that during the term of the current team (2015–2019), more papers were published from the USA and China but there was a clear reduction in the number of papers from Europe compared with the previous term (2010–2014).

evaluate the manuscript independently of the handling team to ensure that the submitting author’s grievance was handled independently. During the past 5 years, we have received 184 rebuttals in which the rejection decision was maintained in 154 cases. The decision was rescinded in 30 cases and finally 12 papers were accepted, accounting for 6.5% of rebuttals being successful. It is important to stress that the amount of work required of editors to handle rebuttals is considerable; we would therefore suggest that authors consider rebuttals carefully.

Finally, and sadly, cases of research misconduct in the form of plagiarism, data manipulation, falsification and fabrication are all part of the publishing process. The role of the Senior Editor was to reach a judgement through a well worked out plan.

Editorial

During the term of this team, there was a single serious case of plagiarism, which led to a manuscript being withdrawn. Data and image manipulation were observed on several occasions. In most cases the situation could be clarified but sadly in a couple of instances the articles had to be withdrawn or retracted.

Role of the Guest Editor

Over the years the Journal became increasingly attractive and with an enlarged team of editors, representing some of the best researchers in the field, it became clear that we needed to find a clear and transparent mechanism to deal with papers coming from members of the editorial team. The solution was to send these manuscripts to “Guest Editors” who would handle these manuscripts independently of the editorial team. In cases of acceptance, this is indicated as a footnote in the accepted manuscript. This has proven to be a very successful approach, allowing us to publish important manuscripts from members of the editorial team with complete transparency.

Guidance to authors

In order to improve transparency and reproducibility, which were central goals of the editorial team, a considerable change to the guidance to the authors was made. The final acceptance of the manuscript would contain details such as the methods used, animal models, cell lines and their validation, to allow the readers to be able to reproduce the experiments accurately. Similarly, the results sections now require accurate description of the number of replicates of various experiments performed and the statistics used. The papers with complex statistics are reviewed by appropriate statisticians to ensure that the results being reported are from adequately powered studies. (<https://www.elsevier.com/journals/journal-of-hepatology/0168-8278/guide-for-authors>).

Launch of JHEP Reports

One of the major achievements of the Journal team was to provide the framework for the launch of EASL’s second Journal in collaboration with the EASL GB and the EASL membership, *JHEP Reports* (<https://www.jhep-reports.eu>), which is led by Jessica Zucman-Rossi. The main rationale behind the launch of this new Journal was that the *Journal of Hepatology* had become progressively more selective, accepting less than 10% of submitted papers, and losing some of the excellent science that simply could not find a place in the Journal, which meant it could no longer fully serve the EASL membership. *JHEP Reports* has a broader publication remit but still uses all the resources and know-how of the *Journal of Hepatology* office and ‘excellence in publishing’ remains at the core of its mission. Following many discussions between EASL GB and EASL membership, *JHEP Reports*, which is an open access journal was launched in 2018 and it is really gratifying to see it already publishing high quality papers.

The future challenges for JHEP

PlanS and its potential impact

In general, it seems reasonable to think that there should be open access to published data, particularly if they are generated from the use of public funds. In order to make this idea a reality, Plan S was launched, the principles of which are to ensure that, by 2021, all scholarly publications on the results from research

funded by public or private grants must be published in Open Access Journals, on Open Access Platforms, or made immediately available through Open Access Repositories without embargo. Although this is a laudable aim, there are major issues around its implementation, which may have a significant impact upon Society journals such as the *Journal of Hepatology* by affecting its revenues. A task force has been set up by EASL to better define the likely impact and to develop the approach *Journal of Hepatology* will take.

Data sharing

In the spirit of openness and widest use of the information available from research, it is clear that sharing raw data is beneficial to other scientists, journals, funding agencies and society as a whole; it is also becoming clear that the individuals sharing the data are also likely to benefit. The greatest reason for data sharing is to increase the reproducibility of data, which is one of the central pillars of science. However, implementation is not easy and the barriers to data sharing include, for example, how to organize data in a presentable and useful way, confusion about copyright, and not knowing where data can be shared and who owns what. This is particularly important where industry is involved, and patents are at risk. The Journal is actively encouraging data sharing but is working on novel ways to make it easier, more transparent and better managed. (<https://www.elsevier.com/journals/journal-of-hepatology/0168-8278/guide-for-authors>).

Peer review

The success and failure of journals is to an extent defined by the expert peer reviewers, who can provide valuable help to the editors in the decision-making process. Being a Society journal, the Journal receives excellent support from its members as peer reviewers. During the past 5 years, more than 2,400 peer reviewers have provided reviews and helped with decision making. Their average time to providing a review was 13.4 days. We are immensely grateful for the commitment of our reviewers who undertake to perform this task without any personal gain. The top 10 reviewers for the Journal over the past 5 years are listed in Table 2.

Public and patient engagement

Although the research community and funders increasingly recognise the importance of patient participation in research, the involvement of the public in publishing research has lagged behind. Although the editorial team recognised the importance of public and patient engagement by introducing ‘free lay

Table 2. Top 10 reviewers from 01.01.2014 until 30.06.2019, and number of reviews performed.

Name	# of reviews
Jean-Charles Nault	124
Jonel Trebicka	88
Frank Tacke	88
Robert Thimme	71
Alexandre Louvet	62
Gianfranco Alpini	59
Claire Francoz	59
Salvatore Piano	57
Pietro Lampertico	57
Thierry Gustot	57

summaries' of published articles and introducing a section on 'Public Health', a lot more needs to be done. EASL's publications task force is actively addressing this issue.

Conclusions

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the many people who have made our job so much fun and so fulfilling. A special word of thanks is due to the EASL GB, Elsevier, the Journal office, the whole of the editorial team, the peer reviewers, the authors and the patients, who continue to volunteer to enter clinical trials. Although we can now have uninterrupted

holidays after 5 years, we will dearly miss leading *Journal of Hepatology*. Finally, we would like to welcome the excellent new editorial team led by Prof. Paolo Angeli and wish them every success in further improving the *Journal of Hepatology* and taking it to new heights.

Acknowledgement

The authors gratefully acknowledge the contribution of the Journal of Hepatology office, who have checked the paper for accuracy and also provided all the data included in this Editorial.