

In defence of open scientific discussion. Reply to Dr. McMahon

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For those not familiar with it, the job of the Editor of a scientific journal can appear ill-defined, without clear aims and boundaries. For us, who try to do the job at our best, the duty of the editor is to promote and contribute to the process leading to the publication of trusted and timely evidence.

If the topic is within the scope of the journal, the editor does not *choose* what to publish. The editor guarantees that the results of the hard work of colleagues, in the form of a manuscript, receives a fair assessment, through a process named peer-review. Such a process has the aim to select high quality submissions, to help authors improve the manuscript and overcome the study drawbacks, in order to get the best possible output. Peer-review is far from being a flawless process, but here at Oral Diseases, we believe that is the best that is available at present. However, that does not prevent us from trying to improve it. For instance, by rendering it more transparent, as we did among the firsts, making available on the web all exchanges between the authors and the editorial team (reviewers, associated editors and editors).

Thus, contrarily from Dr. McMahon, we see no irony whatsoever in having published the systematic review by Sekundo and colleagues (Sekundo 2022). Systematic reviews are a type of synthesis of the literature. In general, they are not aimed to summarize the whole literature that is available or to express the point of view of the authors, but to select the best evidence available, following a transparent method. This is what has been done in the paper by Sekundo and colleagues, according to the opinion of the reviewers and, of an expert associate editor, and a senior editor. If very little can be concluded on the basis of such evidence, particularly when it is sparse and weak as for NICO, the authors of this systematic review cannot be faulted. They simply noted that strong scientific evidence requires top-quality epidemiologic studies, that are currently unavailable for NICO.

Prof. Richard Smith, the former editor of BMJ, wrote in his seminal book, *The Trouble With Medical Journals* that journals are "not in the truth business but in the debate business". We cannot agree more. However, in his letter Dr. McMahon states that "debate should be a strong part of such reviews". This is somehow surprising. First, because a debate does not improve the level of scientific evidence, and second, because a debate needs more voices; otherwise, it is a monologue, which is seldom productive. What happened instead is that the review by Sekundo and colleagues generated an actual debate, which received, and still does, a space in our journal (Bouquot 2022, Muller 2022, May and Lechner 2022). We are not sure whether such a view is shared by Dr. McMahon, judging from his letter to the editor published herewith (McMahon 2023).

We may understand the perplexity of Dr. McMahon on the expertise of the authors, but we do not share it. First, a lack of published papers does not indicate a lack of expertise. It is possible to have a huge amount of clinical experience, even without having published any research paper. Actually, this is very common. Clinicians do not plan research papers after every patient they see; often they try best to treat the patient, possibly based on the evidence provided by the literature (an experience that motivates many of them to start a systematic review). We believe that rejecting a paper because of a supposed lack of expertise of the

authors would be unfair and unethical. Second, the role of experts in the preparation of systematic reviews is debated, at best. In fact, two eminent researchers and methodologists, Prof. Götzsche and Prof. Ioannidis, argued against it, suggesting that “the general recommendation that content area experts should always be included as authors of systematic reviews and meta-analyses is questionable”, bringing reasons, examples, and data in support of their position (Gøtzsche and Ioannidis 2012). Again, room for open and frank discussion.

References

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