

Commentary IV

New horizons for impact discussions needed

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“Deep impact will be the first mission to make a spectacular football stadium-sized crater 7–15 stories deep into a speeding comet.” (from the official homepage of Deep Impact: <http://deepimpact.jpl.nasa.gov>).

Using this image of the deep impact mission, the Forum contribution of Decker et al. is not only a legitimated but a quite necessary one in the science landscape of public health and its related disciplines.

Although the authors do not always stick to the special matter of publishing in the public health sciences, they can demonstrate with great clarity and strong plausibility, that the use of impact factors for judgement purposes across countries and cultures, languages, scientific disciplines, within and across faculties, seems to be a measure that has not been discussed sufficiently with concern to its scientific basics.

The problem, indeed, is not to reject any kind of judging the scientific performance of groups or individuals but to ask whether the contribution of public health scientists can only be measured along these criteria. Often the public health researcher and practitioner is not so interested in the question whether this is a good or poor article but whether this article contributes to the improvement of a certain status quo, that means the lowering of health problems in a certain population. We are far away from having as good criteria for the practice and policy impact as we have for the scientific impact. Another point for discussion could be whether public health scientists should publish more in journals listed in the Journal Citation Report (JCR), or if there are good arguments to strengthen the publication practice, using books, articles in books or journals, where the transfer of knowledge into special public health target groups is more effective. Practitioners, politicians or health administrative staff are not so interested in the latest state of the art articles but in reports about good models or good practice.

So the impact debate pushes public health scientists into a dilemma, or expressed psychoanalytically: it is a classical “double bind situation”. Do we orient more towards the sci-

entific and theoretical side, we may lose the contact to the field we depend on. Do we orient too much towards the practical and political side, we will be punished by a scientific society that is not really interested in questions of practice and policy impact of its research findings.

What can be done? Decker et al. have shown one way: despite all criticism, we have to read papers and publications and then judge the quality and not to trust blindly in what impact factors might indicate. On the other hand we have to discuss daily whenever there is a chance to do, with scientists in our own disciplines, across disciplines and across different “customers” of scientific information, what is a good publication and who will be served by this publication. This seems to be the only chance to convince decision makers that the rapid growth of biomedical (published) knowledge is not identical with its relevance solving problems in a giving health care system. German scientific associations, gathered in the AWMF (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Wissenschaftlich-Medizinischer Fachgesellschaften) have funded a bibliometry commission to discuss these problems. Another solution can be to use the new chances of rapid information given by e-journals like “German Medical Science” and “Psychosocial Medicine”, which are now organized by the AWMF, DIMDI and ZBMed (<http://www.ger-med-sci.de/>). As the impact discussion is an international one, we should be interested to communicate these problems on an international level. We hope, the SPM Forum can contribute to this.

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