

Manifest of the Forensic Genetics Community on the suppression of Forensic Science International: Genetics from JCR

The authors and subscribers of this letter are agents from academic institutions, justice and police organizations, or non-criminal laboratories, from the public or private sector, working in the field of forensic genetics, including both members and non-members of the International Society for Forensic Genetics.

In late July of 2020 we were informed that Clarivate™ decided to suppress Forensic Science International – Genetics (Forensic Sci. Int. Genet.) from the Web of Science Journal Citation Reports™ (JCR), disqualifying the journal from having its 2019 Journal Impact Factor (JIF). This was an absolutely unexpected situation for readers and authors, as Forensic Sci. Int. Genet. had JIF attributed every year after its launching (2007). To our best knowledge, no warning was previously made, at least publicly, catching an entire community off guard. Clarivate™ supports the suppression with the high proportion of self-citations. From JCR Suppression Policy Manual available online it is not clear what Clarivate™ considers a problematic self-cite rate, but it is worth to note that the proportion of self cites of Forensic Sci. Int. Genet. was in 2019 the lowest since 2014, according with JCR data.

The formula used to calculate JIF do not discriminate between self- from non-self- citations, and is easy to understand that Editors may promote self-cites to artificially increase the metric. Nevertheless, it cannot be blindly assumed that a high proportion of self cites relies on a scheme to cheat the system. This is especially sensitive in the case of “niche” journals as Forensic Sci. Int. Genet., specialized in the tight field of forensic genetics. Forensic Sci. Int. Genet. belongs to two JCR categories: “Genetics & Hereditary” and “Medicine, Legal”. Regarding the first category is perfectly understandable the fragile position of Forensic Sci. Int. Genet. as most journals concern genetics and disease, for which is difficult the research area of forensics being of interest. Indeed, this is likely to be the situation of any “niche” journal whenever considered in a broad category. On the other hand, it is not needed a deep look into the “Medicine, Legal” category to understand the huge impact that Forensic Sci. Int. Genet. has on the field. For example, considering its JIF without self-citations, this remains greater than the global JIF (with self-citations) of the journals in the same category in which scope forensic genetics is included.

Forensic Sci. Int. Genet. is the official journal of the International Society for Forensic Genetics (ISFG), which represents more than 1,400 members from over 60 countries, comprising 12 working groups, 9 of which considered by language: Arabian, Chinese, English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Polish and Spanish and Portuguese. Members are typically in academic institutions, criminal justice, police organizations, and non-criminal laboratories, which promotes an impaired proximity and exchange of ideas between scientific researchers and practitioners in the field. All ISFG members receive a complimentary subscription (print and online version) of

the journal, making Forensic Sci. Int. Genet. an appealing place for researchers disseminating their results as the audience of interest is somewhat granted. This does not occur when results of such a specific topic are published in generalist journals, as the dissemination, mainly among practitioners, is difficult to achieve. Indeed, the most important results achieved in forensic genetics in the last years have been published in the only specialized journal in the area. Also, the quantity of Forensic Sci. Int. Genet. communications impresses considering its narrow scope - a total of 376 documents were published in 2017 and 2018. This not only justifies the high proportion of the journal self-citations, as it would be hard to understand if it occurred differently. Indeed, many of us are authors and/or reviewers of Forensic Sci. Int. Genet. and we can testify not only the hard and demanding peer review process, but also the absence of promotion of self-citations by the editorial board.

We are all aware that many funding agencies worldwide rely on the principle of only considering JCR indexed journals when evaluating a project or personal grant proposal. Suppression of a journal, regarding the previous year and without any kind of warning, is an extremely unfair and detrimental situation for researchers who worked hard to publish their work in the journal with more impact in the area, unknowing its dangerous situation regarding JCR. Clarivate™ seems to be aware of part of the consequences of a journal suppression, as stated in their website (accessed 27 July 2020): “We realize that suppression of a journal from the Web of Science Journal Citation Reports™ (JCR) affects publishers, authors, editors and peer reviewers; we do not take this action lightly.” What Clarivate™ does not seem to be aware is that the application of blind methodologies to “niche” journals and small research areas is not only damaging for “publishers, authors, editors and peer reviewers” but also for the research area itself. Indeed, the loss of competitive funding for the research area is an immediate consequence due to the severed curriculum vitae of the applicants. This necessarily leads to a delay on the scientific research development and translation, which will have an impact in the life and well-being of the citizens worldwide. This is particularly true in the case of forensic genetics, where research is rapidly translated into practice. Developments in this field provide valuable tools for law enforcement and fight against crime. Going some years into the past, the investigation of the terrorist attacks in 2001 in USA and in 2004 in Madrid, or coming back to very recent days, the identification of some of the 43 students that went missing in Ayotzinapa, Mexico, are just three striking publicly known examples of the many cases where advances in the field were applied. Forensic Genetics also plays a fundamental role in the identification of missing persons as a result of armed conflicts and violations of human rights, as well as in the clarification and veracity of historical facts. Besides these, cutting edge research on forensic genetics is applied in a daily basis on the investigation of crimes related with sexual assault, robbery, aggression or homicide, as well as in civil kinship assessments. Also, recent scientific advances regarding non-human material has been providing new tools for law enforcements fighting against wildlife crimes, bioterrorism, or food fraud, to cite just a few examples. As being the only journal specialized in forensic genetics, most of these theoretical advances, methodologies, and case reports have been, as expected, published in Forensic Sci. Int. Genet. Indeed, among others, a disinvestment

in the area of forensic genetics may call into question the goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development from United Nations: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>, regarding the promotion of a peaceful society.

All in all, the field of the forensic genetics will be greatly affected by the suppression of the society journal from the JCR. Forensic Sci. Int. Genet. is the journal used by the International Society and its many working groups to publish guidelines for best practice in the field and important recommendations regarding the markers, methodologies and ethical principles, important to keep professionals up to date and using cutting-edge practice in resolving cases. Therefore, the consequences of this decision will permeate through the boundaries of science itself and will have a negative impact in our life in society.

