Scientific and linguistic precision in titles of papers published as original articles in Indian Journal of Dermatology, Venereology and Leprology

Sir,

Title is an important beginning of an article. Readers generally decide whether to read an article or not by seeing the title first. Because it is the title that catches the reader's eyes, it deserves to be written carefully. Despite this, instructions about how to write the title of a paper are generally not available. Instructions for authors of Indian Journal of Dermatology, Venereology and Leprology (IJDVL), like most of the journals, do not contain information in this regard.[1] However, IJDVL is one of the journals which has agreed to follow the Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts submitted to Biomedical Journals as decided by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (Vancouver group).[2] These guidelines are generally known as the Uniform Requirements or Vancouver style.

Uniform Requirements also provide limited information about how the titles of papers are to be written.[3] The requirements mention the following about the titles: "Concise titles are easier to read than long, convoluted ones. Titles that are too short may, however, lack important information, such as study design (which is particularly important in identifying randomized controlled trials). Authors should include all information in the title that will make electronic retrieval of the article both sensitive and specific."

In the present work, we decided to study the titles of 50 papers published as original articles in IJDVL for their scientific and linguistic precision. These 50 articles were selected consecutively starting with the last paper published as original article in the May–June 2008 issue and then going backwards. Thus, the 50th article selected was the fourth original article published in the May–June 2006 issue of IJDVL. We identified and defined scientific and linguistic imprecisions [Table 1], to be looked into in these titles. We first randomly selected 10 titles from the study sample using an internet-based system.[4] These 10 titles were separately examined by us and by an independent observer, who was given a printout of the definitions of imprecisions. We found

Table 1: Working definitions of different imprecisions looked for in the titles

Type of imprecision	Definition
Scientific imprecisions	
Minimization	Omitting important information* about study design
Wrong message	
Overgeneralization	Making exaggerated implications not supported by the work
Misleading words	Title conveying meaning different from the paper
Unclear message	Lack of clarity in what the authors want to say
Linguistic imprecisions	
Extra words and phrases	Deletion of which did not change the meaning intended by the authors
Sensationalization	
Fancy acronym (created for the study which resembles unrelated attractive word) or abbreviation	
Unnecessary adjective or phrase	
Unnecessary question	
Grammatical imprecision	

*Name of experimental animal in animal experiments; mentioning normal or patient volunteers in study on volunteers; the phrase "hospital-based" in hospital-based clinicoepidemiological study; name of diagnostic test and full name of disease in studies about diagnosis; "retrospective" or "prospective" in case series; complete name of the kind of study (e.g., case series, case-control study, cohort study; randomized controlled trial including information about blinding; systematic review; meta-analysis).

no significant difference between our results and those of the independent observer for the scientific imprecisions ($P = 1$), linguistic imprecisions ($P = 0.82$) and total number of imprecisions ($P = 0.70$) (unpaired t test). Subsequently, we examined all 50 titles. The entire papers were studied and the information contained in them was contrasted with the information contained in the titles. Scientific imprecisions were those imprecisions that led to misinterpretation about the scientific contents of the papers. We considered that it is more important not to have scientific imprecisions in the title compared to linguistic imprecisions.

The results are shown in the Table 2. Out of the 50 papers studied, the titles were imprecision-free or precise in only five (10%) papers. Multiple imprecisions were present in some titles. The commonest imprecision was found to be minimization, which was present in 32 (64%) of the papers. Traditionally, it has been thought that short titles are better. Probably it is more important to adequately inform the prospective readers about the important issues such as study design than to keep the title short.

Because of exponential increase occurring in our knowledge, probably more is written in any subject in a year than a reader can hope to read in a decade. Thus, it is clearly important to decide what to read and what to omit. As the title of a paper is critical in helping the reader to make this decision, it is important to clearly establish guidelines regarding the contents of the titles. On authors' part, it may be a nice idea to write the title after all sections of the paper have been written, regarding it as the briefest abstract. Purpose of the present work is not to claim identification of all possible title imprecisions or to say that their presence in titles made the papers inferior. Someone may name or define these imprecisions differently, or prefer to detect different imprecisions, or the methods may be improved. The purpose is to point out that writing titles more carefully is likely to serve the cause of science and its readers better.

Table 2: Scientific and linguistic imprecisions in the titles

Imprecision	Number of titles with imprecision
Scientific imprecisions	
Minimization	32 (64%)
Wrong message	
Overgeneralization	8 (16%)
Misleading words	6 (12%)
Unclear message	9 (18%)
Linguistic imprecisions	
Extra words and phrases	14 (28%)
Sensationalization	
Fancy acronym or abbreviation	7 (14%)
Unnecessary adjective/phrase	3 (6%)
Unnecessary question	2 (4%)
Grammatical imprecisions	4 (8%)
Total number of scientific imprecisions	55
Scientific imprecisions, mean (SD)*	1.1 (0.91)
Total number of linguistic imprecisions	30
Linguistic imprecisions, median (range)*	0 (0–3)
Imprecision-free titles	5 (10%)

*Scientific imprecisions were normally distributed, while linguistic imprecisions were not

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