

Letter from an Editor: Bidding Adieu

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Medical journal editors walk a fine line. They must aspire to impartiality, open-mindedness, and intellectual honesty. They must try to select material for its merit, interest to readers, and originality alone. They also want their journals to have a voice and a personality. If they are doing their jobs well, they should give no favors, and they should have no friends.

– Jerome Kassirer, *Unanticipated Outcomes: A Medical Memoir*, 2017

As the editor of the *Indian Journal of Dermatology, Venereology & Leprology (IJDVL)*, this is my final message to you all from the bully pulpit. Since 2017, it has been an interesting six years, with its share of more ups than downs, but hardly a dull moment. It has indeed been a unique honour to serve as an editor of a journal of such standing for two consecutive stints, and I am thankful to the Indian Association of Dermatologists, Venereologists & Leprologists (IADVL) for according me this privilege. As I leave, it gives me great satisfaction to report that the journal is going from strength to strength.

Despite an intervening two years of a brutally disruptive pandemic that was definitely challenging for reviewers and editors alike,¹ also considering that this was exactly the period during which the journal made the transition, not only from one publisher to another, but also from one manuscript management system to an entirely new one, it was no mean feat that our record of punctuality in publishing remained intact. This gains more significance when we take into account the fact that the transfer process itself was anything but smooth as our erstwhile publisher came up short on upholding publishing industry standards in several areas, putting our data in jeopardy.²

We continue to adhere to a publication model known as ‘platinum open access’, meaning that neither the authors nor the readers have to pay anything in order to publish or have complete access to the data published in the journal.³ Our author base is expanding all the while, having reached literally all corners of the world, helping *IJDVL* to establish itself as a truly global journal. The number of expert peers helping us to appraise the submissions in our journal continues to enlarge on a yearly basis. The number of readers accessing our data is huge. The citations of our articles continue to increase

at a steady pace. The production values of our journal are excellent and our exacting standards of image reproduction are now being followed by other journals.

It goes without saying that the current stature of the journal is nothing but a reflection of the accomplishments of the previous editors. As I had averred at the time of taking over as the editor of this journal, my primary aim has been to maintain the momentum, keep up the good work and preserve the positive characters of the journal painstakingly etched by my predecessors. It has, indeed, been an exercise in continuity.⁴ Though sounding minimalist, on retrospectoscope, achievement of this aim has required great effort, which could not be done without the world-class editorial team that I was fortunate to build and lead. I am acutely aware that the outcomes have not always matched the quantum of our efforts. I take the sole responsibility for the limitations which have arisen or have persisted despite putting in my best for the journal during every day of the past seven odd years (including one year as editor-elect).

Having said that, we could also find some time and energy to make a few changes and innovations which, we hope, may be counted among worthwhile legacies for the journal for some time to come.

While we took the decision to make the editorial team less anonymous at the time I took over, recasting the Editorial Board to display the respective responsibilities of the individual members, a new cadre of editors, namely Image Editors, formally came to be recognized, certainly a rare event in the history of biomedical journals.

A team of specialised editors, named Language Editors, was conceptualised and created by my predecessor, Dr M Ramam.

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This was an innovation of necessity, given that *IJDVL* has been a favoured vehicle for non-English speaking authors, and the journal never have had the luxury of really efficient copy-editing services rendered by the publishers. Besides, readability has always been accorded a premium in this journal, even though, or perhaps, because of the fact that medical discourse is often dry and arcane.⁵ We renamed this group as Content Editors, recognizing that their job was not only to make articles more readable, but also to perform post-peer review editing of provisionally accepted manuscripts.

Thus, a multilayered editorial team, tasked with triage editing (Assistant Editors), conducting and moderating the peer review system (Section Editors), image editing (Image Editors) and post-peer review language and content editing (Content Editors) form the crux of the *IJDVL* Editorial Team. The editorial workflow, first enunciated by Dr Ramam in 2016 in an editorial,⁶ has been streamlined over the years. Notable changes were made during the changeover to a new online manuscript manager, EditorialAssist™, in 2020. We significantly customised the system as well as our processes over a period of time, taking advantage of a software where the editorial and production workflows were fully systematised and aligned together. We took our lessons from the repeated brainstorming sessions that we had in order to hasten our article processing, a perennial bugbear of this journal,^{7,8} and strived to develop a workflow that is as efficient as any. The current *IJDVL* review process and workflow have been depicted through figs. 1 and 2.

We would not make any tall claim, however, regarding the necessity of speeding up our article processing time further, plagued by human factors all the time as it is. Furthermore, in the publication of a scientific journal, there is always this tension between the opposing demands of achieving speed in the article processing and the necessity of publishing data that is as valid and authentic as it can be. I would unabashedly admit that our editorial policy always veered towards the latter whenever we had to choose between one of the above. To us, the sanctity of our peer review process was inviolate.⁹ As we saw it, accuracy and integrity in the published work in a clinical journal like ours can be truly termed, without being hyperbolic at all, as a matter of life and death. Without it, unquestionably, a lot of people could be harmed. On all these occasions, our guiding light was a famous statement by Jerome P. Kassirer, a celebrated ex-editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine*: “Good editing and careful peer review do not guarantee that a journal’s content is accurate, reliable, and reproducible, but these practices do increase the likelihood of these attributes.”¹⁰

Closely related to this predilection was my explicit interest in evidence-based dermatology that led to the decisions of publishing only pre-registered interventional studies, meta-analyses and systematic reviews and creating a dedicated space for systematic reviews and meta-analyses. We also made the submission of CONSORT 2010 (for clinical trials) and PRISMA (for systematic reviews and meta-analyses) checklists and flowcharts mandatory.¹¹ This may sound bureaucratic, but

it goes a long way in transparent reporting. The principle is simple: “Place your bet and show us your hand”.¹²

On the opposite side of the spectrum, we introduced a slew of article categories, namely Pearls, Musings and Snippets which would attempt to stimulate a reading experience quite different from the dry, heavy-going and increasingly technical nature of medical science reporting. This was borne from our conviction that the discussion of clinical problems and even the exchange and transmission of complex scientific issues and innovations can be made easygoing and engaging. Likewise, in articles reporting original research, that is in the article categories of Original Articles, Brief Reports, Award Articles, Net Studies and Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses – sections particularly prone to having technical verbiage – we introduced Plain Language Summary that should be understood even by lay people. In the same vein, we introduced video documentation in *IJDVL* to showcase new therapeutic pearls. In another attempt to bring the journal down to earth from its vantage of ivory tower existence, we introduced a regular *IJDVL* session in every DERMACON (National Conference of IADVL), where the editors are open to praise and pillory by our readers, and are bound to answer every question, however uncomfortable those might be.

In *IJDVL*, we have always given prominence to letters, a very important segment of scientific communication. In keeping with that, we have increased the number of awards in the Letters category from three to five - one each for the best case letters, observation letters, therapy letters, study letters and net letters.

A noteworthy addition during this period was the Award Article – a category for original articles based on research for postgraduate dissertation. Cash awards, both for the postgraduate student and the research guide, were introduced and the awardees would be felicitated in the national conference of IADVL. This was done to promote

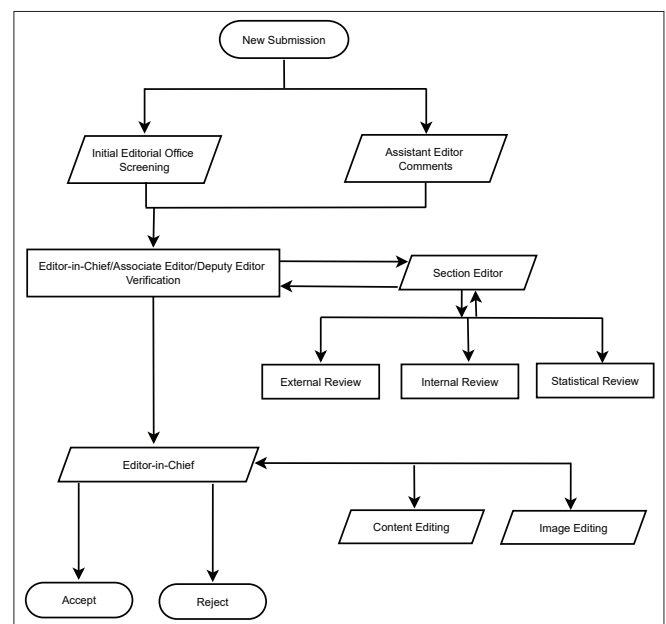


Figure 1: The current *IJDVL* review process

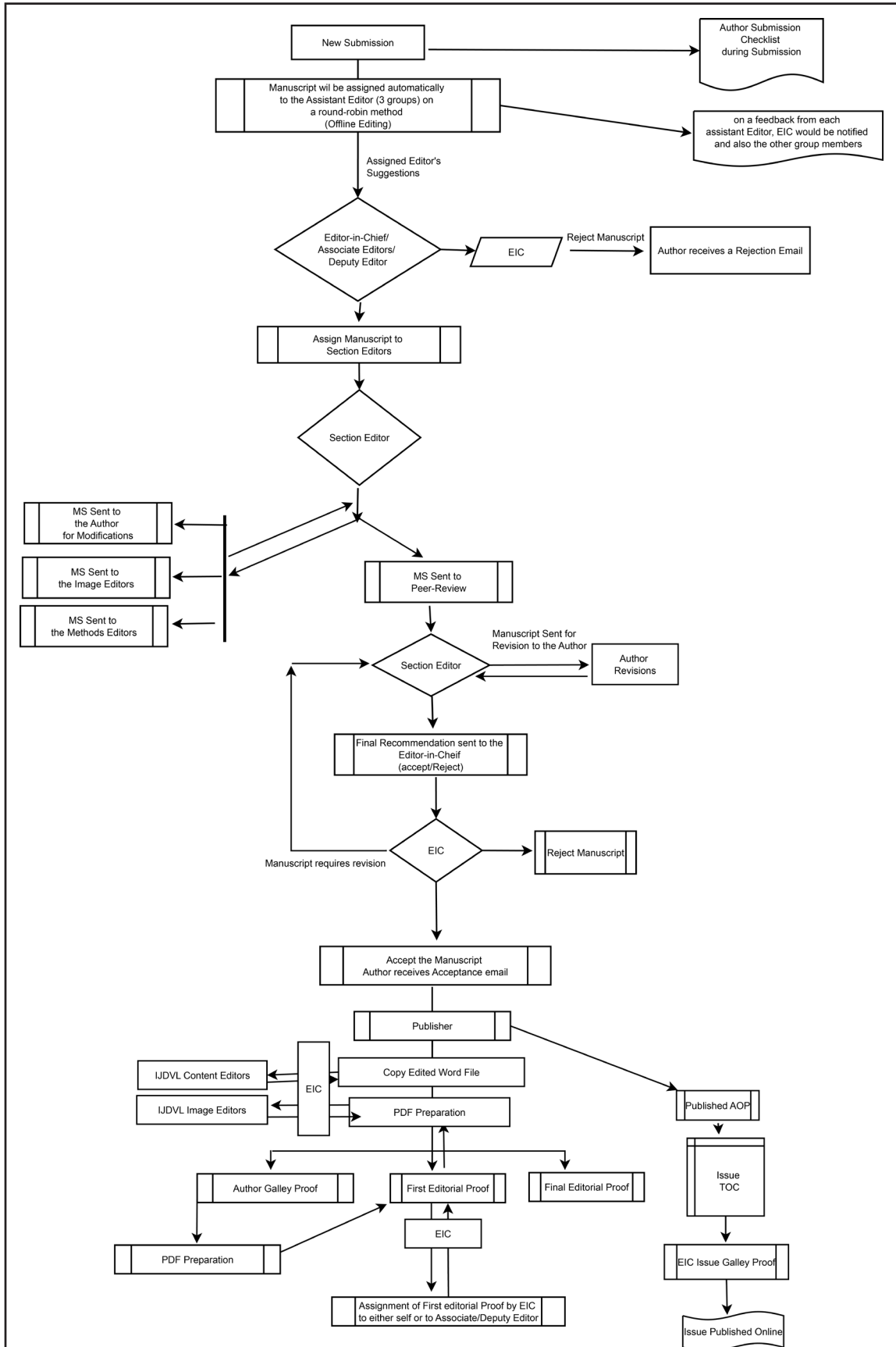


Figure 2: The current *IJDVL* editorial workflow. EIC: Editor-in-Chief; MS: Manuscript; AOP: Ahead of print; TOC: Table of contents; PDF: Portable document format.

qualitative improvement in curricular research with a hope that it would facilitate the research ecosystem of Indian clinical dermatology.¹³ Every year, we used to publish one or two Award Articles since its inception. Last year, there was none because of lack of submissions. We only hope that this unique endeavour does not die a premature death due to our faculty and students taking the easy way out and opting for publishing their research in questionable journals having a less exacting or, sometimes, a nonexistent peer review process. It is a matter of concern that such avenues of publication are not only thriving, but also multiplying steadily, including doppelgangers of our own *IJDVL*.¹⁴

We should also mention here that the 2019 Journal Citation Report saw *IJDVL* attain a historic Journal Impact Factor (JIF) level of 3.030. For four years (2017–20), *IJDVL* was the highest ranked scholarly journal published from India across all disciplines (all sciences including biomedical and health sciences, physical sciences and mathematics, technology and engineering, social sciences and the arts and humanities), as per the JIF. For the record, this was despite the remarkably JIF-unfriendly editorial decisions, manifested by *IJDVL* not getting submerged by the tide of Covid-heavy submissions during the pandemic and refusing to publish those without due diligence; denying to brand the journal as a vehicle of the so-called ‘skin of colour’ articles;¹⁵ or, by taking the plunge during the middle of a pandemic to change the publisher. Perhaps, most importantly, the Editorial Board never succumbed to the temptation of jettisoning the basic character of *IJDVL* as a core clinical journal on a global platform under the blinding, scrutinising glare of impact factors and did not relentlessly pursue the target of achieving ever higher JIFs only for the sake of it.¹⁶ This was entirely a possibility, however, and would have killed the soul of this journal.

Among the sundry limitations of the current team, the failure to properly utilise social media should be prominently listed. For this, the ambivalent editorial attitude toward social media and its role in biomedical publishing,¹⁷ as well as lack of resources, including the perennial financial penury of the journal, would have to blame. Though we introduced videos, more innovative and widespread use of multimedia is possible and necessary in biomedical journal publishing in the 21st century. Despite some attempts, we could not introduce the same. We did discontinue with the practice of seeking submissions for Case Reports, but that had less to do with any gambit for increasing the journal impact factor, and had more to do with our inability to editorially justify the distinction between case reports and letters. There was a remarkable lack of invited articles during this period, including symposium articles, as there was always a concern that the invited authors might find it too laborious to comply to our peer review process. Also, despite my numerous efforts, I failed to improve the financial situation of the journal.

Once again, I thank the numerous remarkable individuals who have collaborated with me in the editorial team during the past half a dozen years. I also thank our current publisher, Mr Pritesh Sheth in particular, for creating an enabling environment for our authors, reviewers and editors by customising the

manuscript management system according to our demands at every step, big and small. I could not survive this tenure but for the immense help rendered by Tapas Kayal, our indefatigable Editorial Assistant, every single day.

The *IJDVL* editor has the onerous responsibility to manage the journal funds along with the sundry editorial responsibilities. At a time when the pharmaceutical industry has shown hardly any enthusiasm to support an editorial dispensation impervious to commercial interests, it has been a humongous job for Dr Rajeev Sharma, our long-serving (and, I may venture to add, long-suffering) Managing Editor, to secure advertisements and keep the journal running. It is to his eternal credit that the journal working funds have not dried up completely.

To go back to the quote by Dr Kassirer at the beginning of this Editorial, editing is a lonesome job. It tests the patience of even the best of the best. In this context, I am immensely grateful to members of my team and others (especially my family, Tapas and Pritesh, and not necessarily in that order), who had to bear the brunt of my impatience on numerous occasions. Along with many others, myself included, my family would perhaps be the most relieved to see my departure from this journal. They have waited long enough.

I welcome Prof Archana Singal, along with her team, in the hot seat. I wish her all success in this position, which is as demanding and as gratifying as any, from the core of my heart.

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