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Editorial

Perceived Journal Quality: An Indicator of Research Quality

By Kathleen Fahy (Editor in Chief) and Jenny Fenwick (Deputy Editor)

In this issue of Women and Birth we have decided to report to you on the growing strength and international reputation of Women and Birth: The Journal of the Australian College of Midwives. This editorial reflects, in part, the submission that the Australian College of Midwives has made to the Australian Research Council (ARC) so that Women and Birth can be accurately ranked in the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) (1).

The purpose of the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) exercise is to assess research quality using a combination of metrics and expert review by committees comprising experienced, internationally-recognised experts. One part of the ERA involves determining indicators of research quality. One indicator is the quality of the journal where researchers publish their work. The assumption is that higher quality research is published in higher ranked journals. The ARC is currently consulting the disciplines and the universities to determine the ranking of journals within each discipline: see http://www.arc.gov.au/era/default.htm for more details.

The Australian Research Council seeks to place each journal in one of four tiers. In summary the criteria for each tier are:

An A* journal is one of the best in the field (top 5%). Virtually all papers are of very high quality. These are the journals where the work that really shapes the field is published. Researchers boast
about being published in A* journals. Acceptance rates are typically low and the editorial board is dominated by field leaders, including many from top institutions.

The majority of papers in an A (top 15%) are of very high quality. Publishing in a A journal enhances the researchers’ reputation showing that they have real engagement in the global research community and they have something to say about problems of some significance. Typical signs of an A journal are lowish acceptance rates and an editorial board which includes a reasonable fraction of well known researchers from top institutions.

Tier B cover the next 30% of journals which have a solid, though not outstanding reputation. Tier B publishes a few papers of very high quality. B journals are often important outlets for PhD students and early career researchers. Typical examples are regional journals with high acceptance rates and editorial boards with few leading researchers.

Tier C includes quality, peer reviewed journals that do not meet the criteria of higher tiers.

**Women and Birth**

We have argued that Woman and Birth should be categorised as a Tier A journal. Our reasons include the following:

Prior to the launch of *Women and Birth* in 2006, the Australian College of Midwives published a paper-based journal called the Australian Midwifery Journal. That journal had circulation that was largely limited to Australia, an Editorial Board that, in some instances, lacked academic standing and review criteria that needed to be improved. Thus, in our view, Australian Midwifery Journal would have been correctly classified as a Tier B journal at that time. Since the launch of Women and Birth in 2006, however, the journal has undergone phenomenal growth and a significant increase in quality making it now ranked in the Tier A category.
The quality improvements to *Women and Birth* have included publicly calling for journal reviewers and then selecting only those who are PhD qualified and active researchers and authors. The names, qualifications and affiliations of the sub-editorial board and peer-review panel are published in the second page of the journal. In 2005, in anticipation of upgrading the journal, new review criteria were written and disseminated for discussion (2). The new review criteria were adopted by the editors at the beginning of 2006. The rigour of the peer-review process is evidenced, in part, by the declining acceptance rate for articles that are submitted to Women and Birth from 70% (2006) to 44% currently.

The growth of the journal is further evidence of the perceived quality of *Women and Birth*. The evidence of growth is the increase in downloads of full-text articles which has risen from 1422 in 2006 to 9824 downloads so far in the half year to June 30th 2008. *Women and Birth* is read all over the world: for example, there have been 609 downloads from the US, 1278 from the UK, 240 from Canada, 222 from the Netherlands, 116 from Thailand and 63 from South Africa (from a total of 58 countries who downloaded from our journal). The percentage of authors from countries other than Australia has increased from 9% in 2006 to 20% in 2008. The increased readership, international reach and multi-national authors who contribute to Women and Birth is evidence of high professional esteem. In addition, *Women and Birth* offers copyright/intellectual property protection for authors and it is published in print and on line.

*Women and Birth* is one of only four midwifery journals that is dedicated to advancing the discipline through a focus on publishing original research and scholarship and has uses a double-blind peer review process; and has a editorial board comprised primarily of PhD qualified midwives who are active in research; and is immediately available internationally via large scale online publishing.
Evidence Based Midwifery (Royal College of Midwives) is double-blind peer reviewed, has a number of PhD qualified active researchers on its editorial board. Evidence Based Midwifery is available online to members of the College and to institutions and individuals who subscribe to the journal. Other journals that are double-blind peer-reviewed but are print-based and not available widely and immediately online are: The Practising Midwife (UK), New Zealand College of Midwives Journal, The Canadian Journal of Midwifery Research and Practice and The African Journal of Midwifery.

Journals that are available online but the editorial board and review process could not be determined include The Iranian Journal of Nursing and Midwifery and the Journal of Japan Academy of Midwifery: both published in English.

Midwifery Journals that include articles on news, professional debates, practice updates, student views along with some peer-reviewed articles that may or may not be reviewed by leading researchers include: MIDIRS Midwifery Digest; The British Journal of Midwifery (MA Healthcare); International Journal of Midwifery (journal of International Confederation of Midwives); Midwives Magazine (from Royal College of Midwives, UK); Australian Midwifery News (ACM); Midwifery Today (UK); Midwifery Matters, (Association of Radical Midwives (UK)) and Midwifery Matters (New South Wales Midwives Association).
In conclusion, the purpose of the ranking of journals is a process of assessing high quality research. We acknowledge the need for a range of midwifery journals to serve a range of purposes including publishing; methodology, expert opinion, educationally focussed papers, practice issues, student papers and topical debates and news relevant to midwives. Journals also provide a way for midwives, who have historically been silent, to have a voice in the services provided to childbearing women and their families. Some of the lower ranked journals allow for research students and clinicians to refine their arguments and writing skills as they seek to have an impact on problems of some significance. Therefore our comments, above, should be understood, not as devaluing any journal but only as our opinion about the high quality ranking of *Women and Birth* as a publication venue for research related papers.

References
