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Increased submissions to ophthalmology scientific journals during the COVID-19 pandemic

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic began at the end of 2019 and quickly became a global issue affecting most countries in early 2020. Lockdowns were implemented by most countries and continued in various forms for around two years. These unprecedented restrictions were elevated and reduced with the pandemic waves within each geographical area, causing many people to stay at home, sometimes for considerably extended periods. Education was often performed on online platforms, and, where possible, people would work from home [1]. For clinical research, this meant that investigations involving human subjects were postponed [1,3]. The extensive disruption has led to incalculable setbacks for investigators, many affecting career advancement. These include cancellations of long-running experiments, the loss of opportunities to collect data, and lack of access to specialized instrumentation [1,4]. In many cases, researchers altered their types of study as this presented a unique opportunity to focus on either existing data sets or undeveloped manuscripts. Research administration had been equally affected as they were inundated with urgent requests for approvals for COVID-19 related studies [2]. Many journals expedited

submissions related to COVID19 and publishers waived the 'open access' fee for COVID-related papers to ensure good quality and evidence-based information was available for the basis of changes that were being implemented by authorities. Initially there was some concern over contact lens use during the pandemic and whether the risk of adverse events increased. An important paper looking at this and dispelling some of the myth and providing an evidence base was published in CLAE [5]. This paper was reviewed, revised and accepted for publication within 3 days and was online shortly afterwards so that practitioners had a reliable source of information.

Anecdotally, many journal editors commented on the unprecedented increased number of submissions and publications to their journals. That was certainly true at CLAE, and we wanted to know if this was the case in other ophthalmic journals. We contacted the Editors of 100 ophthalmic scientific journals and asked them about the number of submissions during the two years of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to the period two years prior. Thirteen journal editors responded, and the information is summarised below (the journals are not named as this information is

Journal	Year	Total Submissions	Full articles	Reviews	Editorials	Case reports	Letters	Other	COVID related Publications (2020–2021)
1	2018–2019	490	429	30	6	3	6	16	34
	2020–2021	769	665	27	11	6	19	41	
2	2018–2019	150	147	1			2		19
	2020–2021	219	214	1			4		
3	2018–2019	2631	1658	64	6	591	128	145	33
	2020–2021	3198	1899	92	12	934	101	146	
4	2018–2019	1508	144	67			23		11
	2020–2021	1881	204	94			17		
5	2018–2019	2495	2013	161	37	58	188	38	160
	2020–2021	3982	3097	247	74	99	325	129	
6	2018–2019	1232							14
	2020–2021	1361							
7	2018–2019	631	355	12		211	8		12
	2020–2021	895	489	17		316	10		
8	2018–2019	868	700	14		97	34	23	3
	2020–2021	1014	804	36		122	23	29	
9	2018–2019	214	162	33	7		5	5	41
	2020–2021	1541	1033	218	20		41	63	
10	2018–2019	1762							9
	2020–2021	2180							
11	2018–2019	236							8
	2020–2021	312							
12	2018–2019	384	140	105		112	4	23	42
	2020–2021	537	184	142		174	10	27	
13	2018–2019	659	514	35	13	94	3	0	23
	2020–2021	1012	770	55	12	127	37	11	
Increase	%	42.50%	49.40%	77.90%	86.90%	52.40%	46.30%	78.40%	

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considered sensitive for publishers). Most of the journals were able to provide information as to the type of submissions (Full articles, Reviews, Editorials, Case reports, Letters etc.), although three did not provide this breakdown. During two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, the average number of submissions increased by 42% compared to the two years prior, and all types of papers showed more submissions. However, total journal publications did not and cannot increase to that magnitude, as individual journals have page count restrictions. For CLAE, the rejection rate over the pandemic era increased nearly 10% compared to the pre-pandemic era. It would be incorrect to assume that the quality of research was affected as data may have been available pre-pandemic, and journals would be applying the same editorial rigour as they would do usually.

The 87% increase in invited editorials is interesting as it actually represents more of a change in the journal. Some journals may have invited editorials related to the pandemic; in CLAE there were 3 editorials directly related to contact lens practice during the pandemic [6–8]. Review submissions increased by 77% across all journals. Perhaps this is another indication that it was a time to reflect, organise, and more deeply comprehend accumulated knowledge or reveals a change in the way that research was being conducted. Letters are communications by readers inspired by full articles in that journal or a commentary on a clinical finding. We can only speculate as to the cause of the 46% increase in this type of submission, but at CLAE, letters related to clinical observations related to COVID-19 were published and in fact were given publication priority over some other papers because they provided useful and important information to the profession [9–12].

As there was an influx of submissions, there was also a need for more reviewers so that editors could accept manuscripts appropriately and publish them in a timely manner [13]. However, the time frame from submission to publication was lengthened. We also found at CLAE that the increase of new submissions has led to a backlog of papers waiting to be published. Though intuitively, most stages of a publishing platform in a global online environment can be performed remotely, surrounding circumstances such as illness or additional responsibilities may have influenced reviewers' schedules and efficiency.

Although the pandemic caused drastic changes in both the clinical and academic realms, the ophthalmic community showed strength and commitment, applying their time and energy to investigational activity

and advancement of knowledge. The significant increase in submissions during the pandemic, yet unrelated directly to COVID-19, shows our colleagues' genuine dedication to the profession.

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