Ending on a Crescendo: Reflections on Seven Years of a Successful Journal

After seven years as the Editor-in-Chief and Deputy Editors of the American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine (AJRCCM), it is time to hand the journal over to a new editorial team. Few in our respiratory and critical care community will have the chance to serve as an editor or deputy editor of a journal, and yet it is one of the most interesting and rewarding positions to hold during a professional career. In handing over the baton to Fernando J. Martinez and his team, we are proud to leave the Journal in a strong position, and we know that it will be in very experienced hands.

This is the time to reflect on some of the achievements since we took over in January 2015. AJRCCM continues to receive excellent submissions, including original papers and reviews and an increasing number of high-quality research letters that are often pilot or early studies. Our acceptance rate is ~10%, which means that we disappointed many of you, but because of the volume of submissions we receive, we can only accept the very best papers. In addition, as AJRCCM is a society journal, we must balance published papers to include various topics in basic, translational, and clinical research in respiratory and critical care medicine. Our peer reviewers are invaluable in this process, and we would like to thank them all for their help with decisions and speedy reviews. We also strove to obtain an editorial for each original paper and are grateful to all our editorial authors for meeting our tight deadlines.

Something new our team introduced to AJRCCM was special issues focused on a specific topic of interest; we chose to highlight asthma, interstitial lung disease, and critical care. These compendiums attracted exceptional submissions and were very popular. Currently, we are keenly aware of the role that extensive global and local health disparities play in respiratory health and critical care outcomes, and we have made it a priority to address them in the Journal. We recently received excellent submissions on diversity and its effect on health outcomes; you will see these published in the Journal in the coming months. Dr. Martinez will continue this focus during his editorship.

Over our tenure, the impact factor has risen steadily every year and we are delighted that it is now 21.41 (Figure 1). One of the features of this editorial term is that we held weekly meetings every Friday, where we discussed all potentially acceptable papers and other editorial issues. This facilitated the acceptance of high-quality manuscripts, which is reflected in the rising impact factor. Thank you to all our authors for sending such outstanding manuscripts.

One initiative we are especially proud of is our Early Career Editorial Group, initially organized by Alex MacKay and subsequently overseen by James Allinson. The objective of the group has been to train and inspire the next generation of editors by showing them how to recognize good papers, perform peer review, and understand the complexities of publication ethics. It was an absolute joy to interact with this group, and we are delighted that the other American Thoracic Society (ATS) journals have now instituted similar initiatives.

Over our editorial time, AJRCCM has enjoyed increased visibility internationally, and this has been hugely assisted by production of podcasts and animated videos, together with engaging readers on social media. We are very grateful to the podcast and video editors who spent time planning, recording, and holding great author interviews.

Not many journals remain in existence long enough to enjoy their centenary, but in 2017 we had the good fortune to oversee the AJRCCM centenary celebrations. We published a special issue highlighting the history of the journal with a collection of images reflecting its decades of importance to respiratory and critical care medicine. However, it is worthwhile to mention that we are only one member of the ATS family of journals, so we must thank the editors of the American Journal of Respiratory Cell and Molecular Biology, Annals of the American Thoracic Society, and ATS Scholar for all their support, advice, and collegiality over the past seven years. Together, we organized some memorable joint sessions at the annual ATS Conference.

In January 2020, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic descended upon us, soon followed by a marked increase in submissions on COVID-19-related topics. We received more than 2,000 submissions from all over the world, and with it, challenges not previously encountered in medical publishing. There was a desire for fast communication and dissemination of research data, and how long the pandemic would last was unknown. Our objective was to ensure that the COVID-19 papers we accepted were original and would have longevity, although we were aware that similar papers would likely appear in other journals. Scientific accuracy is vital, and all potentially acceptable COVID-19 papers were fully and statistically peer reviewed. The extra workload the pandemic created was absorbed by the associate editors, and we are immensely grateful to them and the ATS editorial office for expeditiously handling so many papers.

The editor of a journal can be compared to an orchestra conductor, whose job it is to ensure all the musicians are working together in unison. So many individuals have contributed to the success of our editorial term, including the associate editors with their hard work and loyal support. We would also like to thank the ATS
Publications Policy Committee for their unyielding guidance, as well as the International Editorial Board for their unswerving efforts reviewing so many manuscripts. We so wish we could thank everyone in person and hope to do so at the ATS International Conference in May 2022.

The ATS editorial office has been truly outstanding, and we will miss our many friends. We thank Diane Gern for always supporting us and providing wise counsel; Marc Bendian for his amazing efficiency and knowing where each manuscript was in the queue; Fay Ling for her unfailing knowledge of statistics, as well as an encyclopedic knowledge of the peer review process and journal metrics; Nicole DeGennaro for perfectly handing production of two issues per month, as well as her wonderfully accurate AJRCCM call minutes. Thanks to Eric Gumpert for overseeing all fraud and misconduct issues, and to all the other members of Diane’s team, including Sean Stevens, Vanessa Johnson, Mary Mobley, Jen Stinnett, and Megan Murphy. Wisia will especially miss her conversations with Eric about the quality of productions in major opera houses!

Our final thanks are directed to all our authors, with a plea to support society journals, to which society members and the global respiratory community give their time freely with little reward for reviewing papers. These journals need you to submit your very best papers so that they can truly and independently reflect the spectrum of respiratory and critical care research and ultimately represent the objectives of our societies and strengthen our specialties for the next generation.

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Figure 1. AJRCCM impact factor. AJRCCM = American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine; JCR = Journal Citation Reports.