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Editorial

Farewell to Professor Eskild Petersen – reflections on editorship in pandemic time



On 31 July 2022, the *International Journal of Infectious Diseases* (IJID) bid farewell to Professor Eskild Petersen, (Figure 1) after his decade as its Editor-in-Chief. Professor Petersen has guided IJID through transition to full open access publishing in 2013, and in the last two years, steered the journal through the “stormy” period of the COVID-19 pandemic. One notable impact of the pandemic was the unprecedented increase of journal publications in all scientific subjects especially in infectious diseases (Else 2020). Between 2020 and mid-2022, over a million articles on COVID-19 have been published internationally (<https://reports.dimensions.ai/covid-19>). For IJID it has meant a three-fold increase in submissions compared to before the pandemic. It has been extremely challenging to sift through the huge number of submissions to select high quality publications on COVID-19 for the assimilation of readers amid the pandemic. This has gone on smoothly at IJID, which has continued its role for disseminating new knowledge relating to and arising from the pandemic especially among under-resourced countries. During the pandemic, young academics from the ISID (International Society for Infectious Diseases) Emerging Leaders programme were brought into the editorial team to facilitate capacity-building and international networking in the infectious diseases field. The pandemic also witnessed the launch of IJID Regions, a sister journal for enhancing the visibility of regional infectious diseases research especially from under-resourced settings (Lee et al., 2021). IJID's impact factor has gone up from 2.35 in 2012 to 12.07 in 2021 and is now ranked within the first quartile of Infectious Diseases journals.

Professor Petersen of Aarhus University, Denmark, is the longest serving Editor-in-Chief of IJID, since its inception in 1996. He has been instrumental in the process of bringing each author's research to scientific publication. Editors like Professor Petersen are curators of scholarship (Franco et al., 2018). The technical tasks of handling submitted manuscripts, coordinating reviews, and managing a repository of data for the scientific community are the essential components of journal publishing (Marcovitch 2008). As a curator, Professor Petersen has applied these editing skills to translate the research submitted to the journal for the intellectual consumption of readers, which for IJID means practitioners and academics in infectious diseases in both clinical and public health fields. When we reflect on editorship, Professor Petersen's contributions are testimony to the importance of “human-ware” in medical publishing, which cannot be replaced by the ever-expanding application of au-

tomated editing software and hardware even in this era of open access publishing.

Deciding on “what to publish” is unarguably the most important skill of an Editor-in-Chief. The decision of which research gets published depends on the evaluation of a range of factors. Foremost, does the work fall within the scope of the journal (<https://www.ijidonline.com/content/aims>)? IJID is a clinical infectious diseases journal which implies that experimental work, animal studies, secondary data analyses without clinical context are not going to be published. Is there novelty in the research work? Unlike basic science research for which novelty is normally easier to define, infectious diseases' novelty can be observational, methodological, related to the timeliness of the reporting of an epidemic, or derived from interventions which may differ by setting. As the official publication of the ISID, IJID has from inception had an emphasis on conditions that are common in under-resourced countries. Diversity is naturally a consideration, which is defined by the setting where the research has been conducted (Figure 2). The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the mushrooming of research in all aspects of SARS-CoV-2 infections. A balance is needed in the publication of infectious diseases research so that COVID-19 research is published in a timely fashion to guide clinical and public health decision making while at the same time not excluding research on other infectious diseases which have not gone away despite the pandemic. While reviewers can assess the quality of a particular submission and advise on its improvement, a decision on ‘publishability’ is made by the Editor-in-Chief as an act of curating scholarship.

In the past, almost all manuscripts landing on the desk of an Editor-in-Chief were sent for peer review. Academic writing in those days typically belonged to a much smaller sphere of elite scholars well defined by their professional discipline. This can't be done today, not just because of the sheer volume of research being generated but also partly because the number of willing reviewers is extremely limited, more so during the pandemic when almost every infectious diseases physician, public health practitioner and microbiologist has been at the forefront of the pandemic response. Online submission is so easy that some authors choose to submit even when the manuscript is not quite ready, or when they have not checked carefully if their work is suited for a particular journal. In the life cycle of each manuscript, the first 72 hours or so after its receipt is the most critical for rejection of manuscripts not suited for the journal to be made, or else submissions accumulate expo-

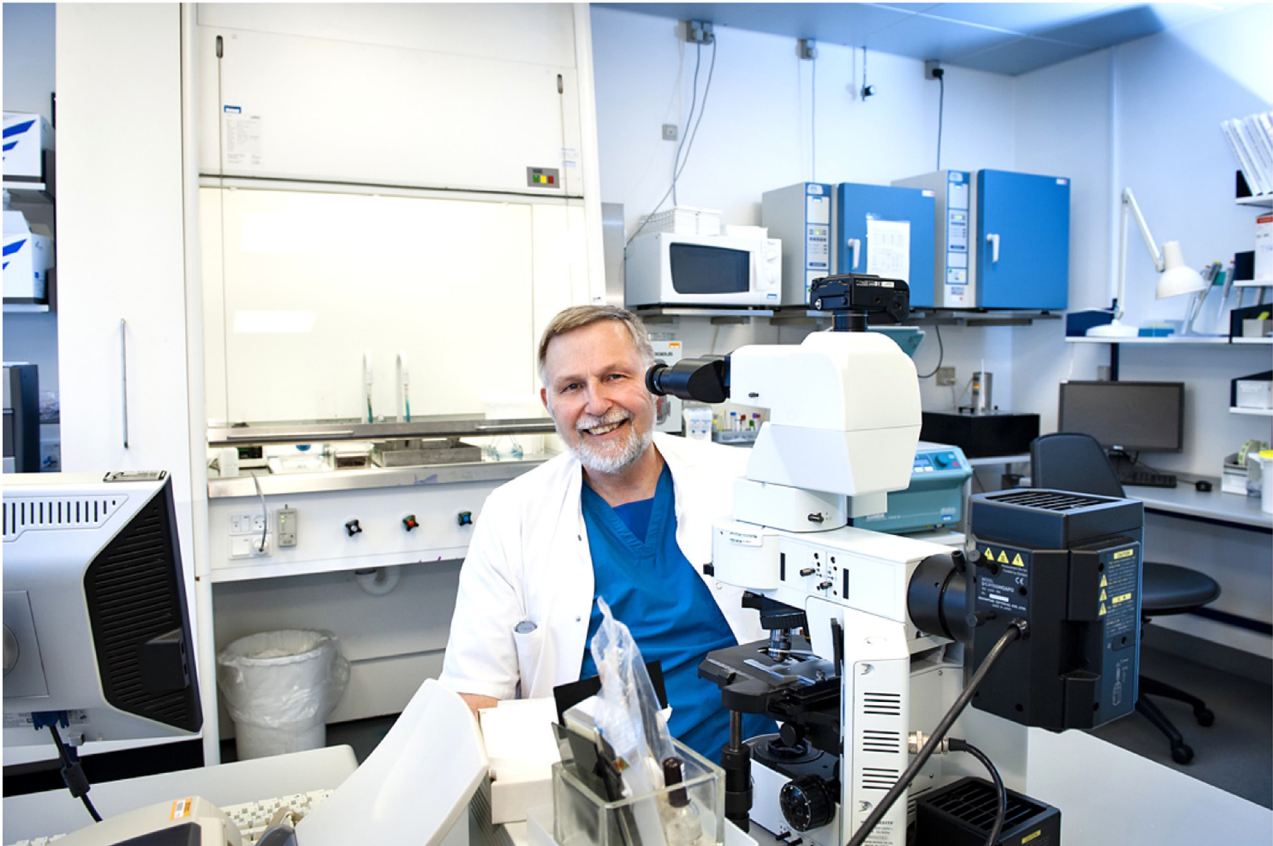


Figure 1. Professor Eskild Petersen at work

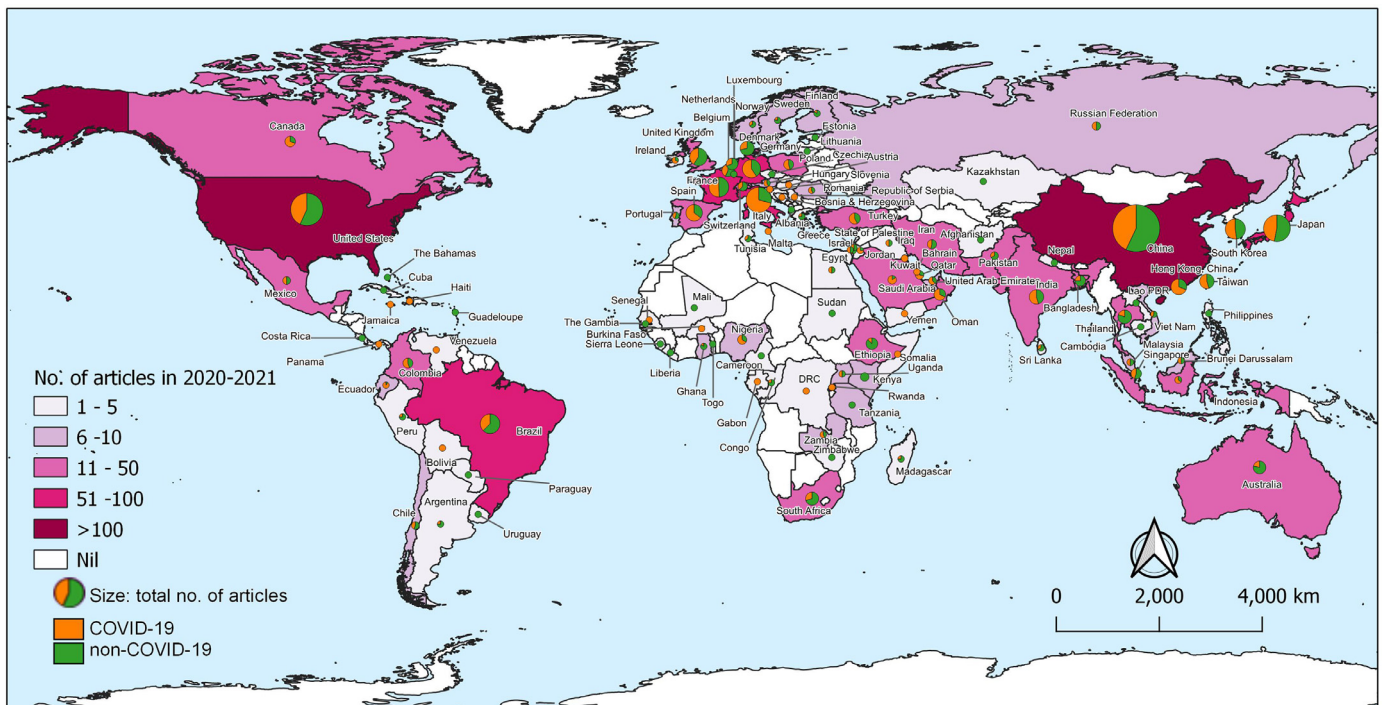


Figure 2. Geographic distribution of published COVID-19 and non COVID-19 manuscripts in International Journal of Infectious Diseases in 2020 and 2021 by country affiliation of corresponding authors.

Table 1

Selected list of editorials published in the International Journal of Infectious Diseases between 2019 and 2022.

DATE	TITLE	CONTEXT / CIRCUMSTANCE
12 Mar 2019	Dengue in India: Towards a better understanding of priorities and progress	Supplement on Dengue in India
3 Apr 2019	“Clean care for all – It’s in your hands”: The May 5th, 2019 WHO SAVE LIVES: Clean Your Hands campaign	WHO SAVE LIVES: Clean Your Hands campaign
2 May 2019	Is the global measles resurgence a “public health emergency of international concern”?	Measles resurgence
11 Jun 2019	Macro-efforts for the micro-elimination of hepatitis C targeting people who inject drugs	World Hepatitis Day
19 Jun 2019	Ebola in the DRC one year later – Boiling the frog?	Ebola in Democratic Republic of Congo, one year on
14 Aug 2019	First series of position papers, with a focus on implementing infection prevention and control measures in low- and middle-income settings	Launching of IJID position paper series
14 Jan 2020	The continuing 2019-nCoV epidemic threat of novel coronaviruses to global health – The latest 2019 novel coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China	Emergence of COVID-119
4 Mar 2020	Commemorating World TB Day 2020: “IT’S TIME” – It’s time to End the Global TB Epidemic	World TB Day
3 Mar 2020	Li Wenliang, a face to the frontline healthcare worker. The first doctor to notify the emergence of the SARS-CoV-2, (COVID-19), outbreak	Death of whistle-blower on Feb 7, 2020
18 May 2020	Sustained and continuous funding for WHO	US withdrew funding for the World Health Organization (WHO).
20 Apr 2020	The voice of nurses in hospital epidemiology and infection control: An example from the 19th century	International Nurses Day
19 Jan 2021	COVID-19 vaccines under the International Health Regulations – We must use the WHO International Certificate of Vaccination or Prophylaxis	COVID-19 vaccine emergency use authorisation
29 Apr 2021	Vaccination against SARS-CoV-2 should be included in childhood vaccination programs	Continuing COVID-19 threat
28 Apr 2021	World Meningitis Day and the World Health Organization’s roadmap to defeat bacterial meningitis in the COVID-19 pandemic era	World Meningitis Day
2 Jun 2021	Mandatory immunization against SARS-CoV-2 of athletes, companions and supporters for the Tokyo Olympics	Tokyo Olympic
27 Jul 2021	Group B Streptococcus awareness month: vaccine and challenges underway	Group B Streptococcus awareness month:
6 Sep 2021	Field Epidemiology Training Programs to accelerate public health workforce development and global health security	first World Field Epidemiology Day
1 Dec 2021	Emergence of new SARS-CoV-2 Variant of Concern Omicron (B.1.1.529) - highlights Africa’s research capabilities, but exposes major knowledge gaps, inequities of vaccine distribution, inadequacies in global COVID-19 response and control efforts	Emergence of Omicron
4 Mar 2022	The show is not over – wild-type polio in Malawi is a wake-up call and an opportunity for elimination efforts	Polio in Malawi
18 Mar 2022	World Tuberculosis Day 2021 Theme – ‘The Clock is Ticking’ – and the world is running out of time to deliver the United Nations General Assembly commitments to End TB due to the COVID-19 pandemic	World TB Day

nentially. Computer-screening by algorithms may fail as these incoming drafts are difficult to code accurately. Hiring helpers to do screening may lead to inconsistency of output. If screening out ineligible work is a tedious task, then selecting eligible submissions for publication is an even bigger challenge. In addition to identifying suitable peer reviewers, a final decision cannot be made without considering not just novelty of the research, but the potential impacts on the scientific knowledge generated and implications for the scientific community and the society as a whole.

Speed cannot be neglected as an important attribute of good editorship. By speed, we do not mean the actual number of hours or days for processing a manuscript, which could be the mechanistic part of any automated editorial management systems. Good scientific findings should be published as soon as possible. Manuscripts not suitable for a journal should be returned to their authors instantaneously so that a new home can be identified by its authors without delay. Reviewing should be conducted in time. Reviewers should be identified by their interest and expertise so that no time is wasted in asking for the input of inappropriate reviewers. Reviewers’ time is important especially during outbreaks, and having a large network of willing reviewers is one sure way of increasing speed (IJID, 2022). Completed reviews should be attended to quickly by editors for decision-making as regards ‘publishability’. The deadlines are set as the minimum, not the best standard. Speed cannot be increased mechanistically but rather as a result of a strong understanding of the subject, mastery of latest advances and appreciation of the amount of time required for each step. A knowledgeable and open-minded Editor-in-Chief working in consultation with his/her team of editors can increase the speed

of the editing process, as shown by Professor Petersen who has been able to keep the processing time low over the last 10 years.

As a scholarly platform a journal cannot function like an empty book-shelf waiting for new additions. Perspective articles and editorials are and should be curated or written by the editors. Professor Petersen never shied away from making a comment on the scientific findings presented in the journal. These ranged from criticism on control measures, advocacy for improvement in public health intervention, and appeal for attention to an issue in infectious disease. Jerome Kassirer, then Editor-in-Chief of the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 1999, on discussing editorial independence, asserted that journals should have a voice and a personality (Kassirer 1999). In similar vein, Roger Colliers summed up the attributes of a perfect Editor-in-Chief, as “No favour, no friends” (Collier 2011). Professor Petersen has driven a number of important position statements published in IJID that have spoken with the voice of the society on critical issues in global infectious diseases (Table 1).

In today’s internet-based, automated and data-driven editorial process, the position of the Editor-in-Chief may have become increasingly marginalised. For some mega-journals (Collier 2011), editorship has been replaced by robotic technology or artificial intelligence not unlike driverless vehicles, with technical staff playing a supporting role in protecting and maintaining the engines. We agree with Jerome Kassirer who argued that an Editor-in-Chief, as one who “...must aspire to impartiality, open-mindedness, and intellectual honesty, must try to select material for its merit, interest to readers, and originality alone” (Dinis-Oliveira 2022). These are, we believe the same qualities Professor Petersen held, who

has truly managed IJID as a powerhouse for curating scholarship in clinical and public health infectious diseases.

We wish Professor Petersen well and record our gratitude.

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We thank Dr Ngai-Sze Wong for creating the map (Figure 2)

Shui-Shan Lee*

*International Society for Infectious Diseases
Stanley Ho Centre for Emerging Infectious Diseases, The Chinese
University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China*

Paul Anantharajah Tambyah

*International Society for Infectious Diseases
Infectious Diseases Translational Research Program, National
University of Singapore, Singapore*

Aisha Ahmed Abubakar

*International Society for Infectious Diseases
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria*

Alison Helen Holmes

*International Society for Infectious Diseases
Department of Infectious Disease, Faculty of Medicine, Imperial
College London, United Kingdom
Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, University of Liverpool, United
Kingdom*

*Corresponding author.

E-mail address: sslee@cuhk.edu.hk (S.-S. Lee)

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