
My life as an editor - Paola Dazzan



The prominent scientist and physician Dr Paola Dazzan made her mark in psychosis research at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King's College London. Dr Dazzan's exciting work with biomarkers contributes to the development of individualised predictors of illness course and treatment response.

Dr Dazzan is also an honorary consultant psychiatrist at South London & Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust, treating women with mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and schizophrenia in the first year after childbirth. Between these roles, Dr Dazzan serves as deputy editor of *Schizophrenia Research* and associate editor of *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences*.

In this interview, I talked to Dr Dazzan about how she balances the three formidable roles of academic researcher, clinician, and journal editor.

How did you become interested in psychiatry?

I became passionate about psychiatry at an early age. In secondary school we read the works of Freud, and I immediately wanted to know more. I went into medicine [at the University of Cagliari] to practice psychiatry, planning to become a full-time clinician. Psychosis is particularly fascinating to me – it has an interesting psychopathology and provokes the question of how the brain becomes affected to the point of altering one's perception of reality.

What made you interested in academic research?

I obtained a UK fellowship, and during my specialist training here I realised the importance of both clinical work and research. As a clinician, you treat people who suffer from mental illness, but with research you can also work on answering important questions in this field. I decided to do both.

One of my dreams is to develop effective biomarkers. We should be able to use more of what we know about psychosis to make a difference in the lives of patients.

Between your research and clinical work, how do you find time to be an editor?

It is very difficult, but for me being an editor has also been a fascinating experience. As a scientist I have been the one submitting my results. Now I am on the other side, and I start to see all the submissions going to a journal. I try to protect half a day each week for my editing role – some weeks this works and some weeks upcoming deadlines make this impossible. You can make it work if you allocate and protect your time.

Although I am actively involved with the Athena Swan initiative [which establishes guidelines for women's work hours in academia], I do sometimes work on the weekends. It is a time when I have no distractions, and I don't have to rush to meetings or be in the office. I can login and view my list of papers.

Editing is something I really enjoy – for me it's an intellectual activity, not a job.

What has been helpful to you as an editor?

Having a good relationship with the senior editor has been very important to me. It's good to have someone to turn to when you receive a tricky question from the author or the author is not happy about your decision. It's crucial to have someone you can ask "How do you think we should address this?"

We also hold teleconferences with the publisher, the authors, and other deputy editors, which have been very helpful. Our editorial board meets in person once a year.

What have you found surprising?

One thing that surprised me when I started as a deputy editor is how difficult it is to get reviewers for papers. Indeed, it is very difficult, as academics are now so overloaded. With the pressure we have to publish, everyone is genuinely receiving many more papers to review.

We receive hundreds of submissions per week, and it is our job as editors to perform the first review. If a paper is unlikely to be published (based on sample characteristics, methodology, or the strength of the investigated questions), we will discuss if we should send it out for further review. Many of the papers will not be sent out.

If a paper is to be sent out, I usually pick around six reviewers. It becomes difficult when authors are unhappy with a decision and bypass you to go straight to the senior editor. Yet this is not common and in the five months that I have been deputy editor, we have only had two or three complaints.

It is helpful to have an editorial check, as it avoids overloading reviewers with papers, reduces the time authors have to wait for a rejection, and helps maintain the overall quality of the journal.

Must reviewers be senior academics?

Reviewers can be postdocs as well. I also tend to involve my final-year PhD students in reviewing with me if they're completing a PhD on the topic. This helps them better understand the review process. Postdocs also tend to write more detailed reviews, compared to senior academics who are pressed for time.

The turnaround time depends on the reviewers. I sometimes have to remind them, either through automated emails or personally through my work email. Automated emails are easy to ignore, and I find that a personal relationship with the reviewers is important.

How do you view papers with negative findings as an editor?

For me, negative findings are very important. I tend to look favorably upon these papers if the negative finding is something new and unexpected. Negative findings should not be penalised if the paper addresses a valid question and we know the result is not due to a problem with methodology.

What is your opinion on open-source data?

I have not yet seen the effect of publishing raw data on journals. I believe we are moving in the right direction, and we now have several consortia with large datasets such as Enigma. We need large samples for neuroimaging research and genetics, and we are now finding ways to do this within the ethical approvals.

I support the creation of consortia. A lot of funding is currently spent on small studies that cannot answer certain questions by themselves. To answer these questions, we must merge datasets.

We have a duty to the people who participate in our studies and to the funders to make the best use we can of the information we have available.

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Good practice: ASM journals eliminate impact factor information from their journals' websites

Much has been written about the overuse and abuse of impact factors. Despite this discussion and the many convincing arguments that impact factors should *not* be used the way they are (especially for evaluation of scientists), nothing really serious has changed. Hence we would like to point out the interesting decision of the American Society for Microbiology (ASM) to *not* publish impact factors on their journals' web sites¹. These journals are: *Antimicrobial Agents and Chemotherapy*, *Applied and Environmental Microbiology*, *Clinical Microbiology Reviews*, *Infection and Immunity*, *Journal of Clinical Microbiology*, *mBio*, *Microbiology and Molecular Biology Reviews*, *mSphere*, and *mSystems*.

We need to communicate this news to a much wider audience than that of the ASM. Maybe this important decision will trigger similar changes in other society journals? Imagine, if most editors and publishers get rid of impact factors, then those administrators, politicians and others who have an unhealthy obsession with controlling scientific development will need to reconsider their affection for this metric?

Just so you know, some of the ASM journals do not have very high impact factors, but they have nothing to be ashamed of. So, let's follow ASM, and instead of talking about impact factors in our journals, let's welcome the ASM's brave and maybe groundbreaking decision.

References

- 1 Casadevall A, Bertuzzi S, Buchmeier MJ, Davis RJ, Drake H, Fang FC, *et al.* ASM journals eliminate impact factor information from journal websites. *Microbiology and Molecular Biology Reviews* 2016;80(3):i-ii..

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