

Background:

Reviews are an important part of the scientific literature and can be helpful for both experts and general readers in helping them stay informed about the latest developments in a particular field. However, narrative reviews face a substantial risk of bias since some authors tend to cite only a particular subset of articles which suit their opinions. To avoid this bias it might be advisable for a general reader to refer to more than one current review. In addition we wanted to know to which extend authors write exclusively for our journal. The aim of the study was to investigate how many review articles were written by the same subset of authors in a defined time window.

Methods:

All 67 consecutive reviews published in Deutsches Ärzteblatt (DÄ) in 2011 were analyzed. Employing a PubMed search it was determined whether and how often all authors from DÄ had also published review articles on the same topic in other journals. The search was restricted from 2007 to 2015 to cover a 4 year time window before and after the publication in DÄ.

Results:

The median number of authors over the 67 articles was 3.43 (range: 1-6), and they published a median of 1 additional article (range: 1-6) on the same subject. Over the 8-year time window before and after their publication in DÄ, 35 teams of authors (52%) had published no further review articles, and 16 teams (24%) had produced one additional paper. The remaining 16 groups (24%) published 2 to 6 additional reviews (median: 3.4).

In total, 69 additional reviews were identified in the observation period. 29 reviews (42%) were published before the publication in DÄ and 40 (58%) thereafter. For 31 of the 69 papers, a subset of (co-)authors named had also (co-)authored the papers which appeared in Deutsches Ärzteblatt.

For the remaining 38 publications, only one author had also appeared as an author in a DÄ publication on the same subject.

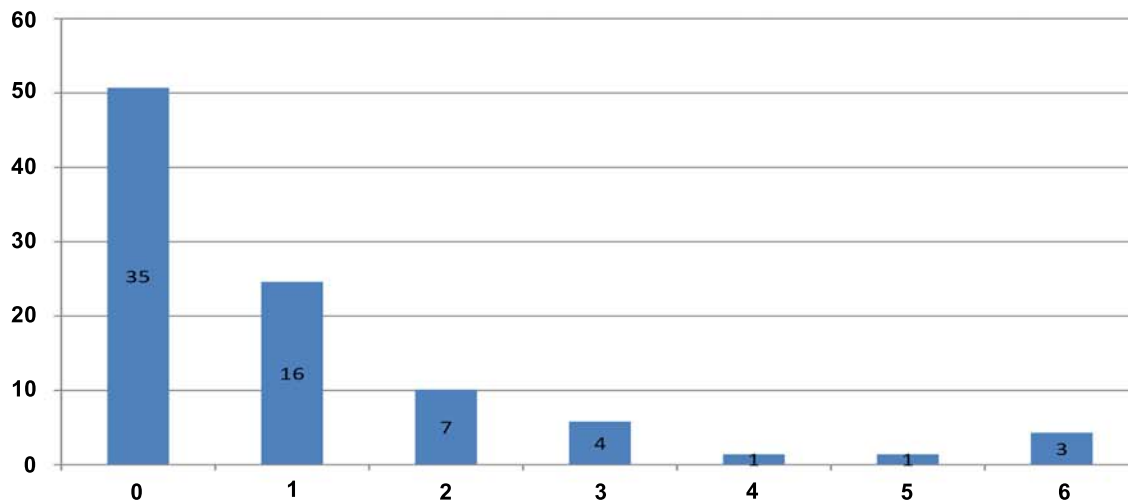
Conclusion:

The majority of authors of papers appearing in Deutsches Ärzteblatt in 2011 published no additional reviews on the same topic in another journal. However, within the 8 year period, a substantial proportion of authors produced 3.4 narrative reviews in addition to the publication in DÄ.

In most cases these review articles had different co-authors, corresponding authors, and senior authors. This might make it difficult for readers to judge whether a given set of reviews originates from the same school of thought or not. This could lead to perceptual bias, in particular among non-experts.

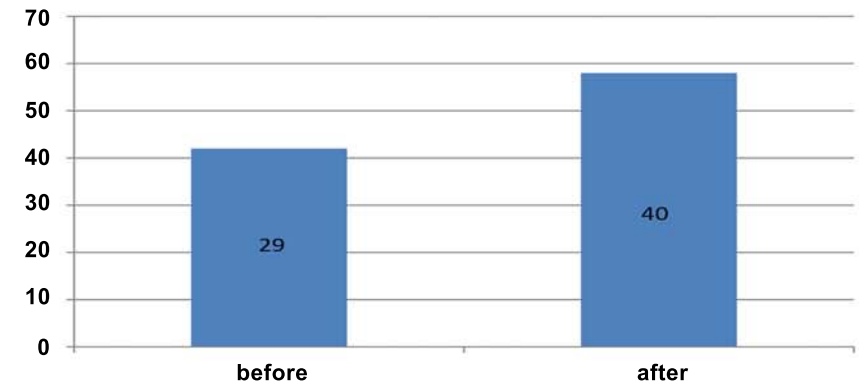
Since the search was performed in one data base only and a substantial amount of narrative reviews are not listed in any data base the proportion of published reviews about the same topic might be considerably larger.

teams of authors (%)



Number of author teams publishing additional review articles, n=67

publications (%)



Publication of additional review articles before or after the publication at Deutsches Ärzteblatt in 2011, n=69