

Stop, Collaborate, and Listen

James A. Betts

University of Bath, Bath, United Kingdom

Take a moment to pause and cast your mind back to the first quarter of 2020. Around the turn of that new year most of us first heard concerning reports about a novel coronavirus. By February we had an official household name for what was coming (COVID-19) and there were already confirmed cases in numerous countries across the globe. Consequently, in March the World Health Organization declared the outbreak to be a pandemic and many governments introduced local social controls and international travel restrictions. At the start of April there were already over 1 million confirmed cases and over 100 thousand deaths attributed to this new virus. Many are still counting the personal, economic and societal costs of the ongoing pandemic and associated responses, with general restrictions on our ability to interact with one another persisting in most regions until at least 2022.

We now find ourselves over 3 years later, where it might be interesting to reflect on how the pandemic impacted scientific progress, particularly in those fields of research in which scientists work in close proximity together with human participants (e.g. nutrition and metabolism). When thinking back to that “lockdown” period when many people were trying their best at homeschooling, doing workout videos in their living rooms, and converting their back-bedrooms into workspaces, it seems reasonable to expect at least a slight lull in the rate at which human research trials were being conducted. There may well be some delayed evidence of such an effect in this journal (*International Journal of Sport Nutrition and Exercise Metabolism [IJSNEM]*), since the number of manuscripts submitted prepandemic in 2018 (392) and 2019 (367) was broadly maintained throughout 2020 (382) and 2021 (345), then last year fell more noticeably (255 papers in 2022).

In terms of the types of papers submitted, given that most human physiology laboratories were closed and research trials had to stop for extended periods around the peak of the pandemic, it is perhaps understandable that there were times when many of the papers we received were scholarly reviews. However, we remained highly selective over which papers were sent out for peer review (especially so for review articles) and thus maintained our primary focus on original research; 75%–80% of papers we published each year since the start of the pandemic describe primary data collection (n.b. our acceptance rate has been consistent at ~14% of all submitted articles since 2019).

One further analysis that can be made in relation to publication patterns surrounding the pandemic is to explore whether global travel restrictions are associated with the number of international collaborations. Remarkably, the proportion of papers we have received each year from multinational author teams has been very stable at ~25% of submissions, from prepandemic through to the

present time. This could be viewed in a positive light—demonstrating how modern technology can enable researchers to establish and maintain collaborations between different parts of the world despite complete bans on crossing international borders. Of course, some submissions that ostensibly have authors from more than one country may in fact be local neighbors or some authors may have institutional affiliations in countries other than where they live or work. Nonetheless, it is surprising that the number of submitted papers representing international collaborations remained so consistently high throughout the pandemic, despite the fact that some of the authors cannot have possibly met in person while working together.

Delving deeper into this area, of those papers categorized as “international collaborations” on this basis that at least one author was from a different country than the other authors listed, it is apparent that a large number of papers met that criterion exactly (i.e. the entire author team were from one country, except one solitary author from elsewhere). That lone international collaborator in many cases had the senior author position (i.e. was listed last) and more often than not was an individual from a Western nation (most commonly the United States or United Kingdom and to a lesser extent Canada, Italy or Ireland). What does all this mean? In many cases, this can reflect collaborative science at its very best; eminent scientists tend to be well connected and naturally receive invitations to join international projects, to which they can then lend their expertise and/or resources. This enables valuable intellectual contributions to the conception, design, analysis and/or presentation of research that can justify inclusion as an author even if that individual was never in the country where the data collection took place. Conversely, there are other dubious cases where international collaborators may be gifted authorships without having fulfilled the criteria outlined by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE).

This leads to the final and main point of this editorial. Several times a year we unfortunately receive papers about which serious concerns are raised regarding data integrity or ownership. Thanks to the diligence of our editors and reviewers, these issues are almost always identified prior to or during the peer-review process but, regrettably, sometimes come to light only after a paper has been published. When such concerns are raised, international collaborators are occasionally quick to distance themselves from the work and to emphasize that they were in fact not involved in any part of the data collection or analysis. I therefore wanted to take this opportunity to remind our readers and contributors that we follow the aforementioned authorship criteria outlined by ICMJE and, in particular, to highlight the final criterion:

Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

Betts (jb335@bath.ac.uk) is Editor of *International Journal of Sport Nutrition and Exercise Metabolism*.

International collaboration should be actively encouraged as an important means for independent laboratories around the globe to share expertise, resources, techniques and workload. However, researchers must keep in mind that by accepting an authorship they are taking on responsibility for the study, which at the very least should

mean they have contributed meaningfully, critically reviewed the data and ultimately approved the submitted manuscript. Hopefully this editorial provides an interesting and transparent account of submission patterns over recent years at *IJSNEM* and also serves as a timely reminder to be cautious when collaborating in research from a distance.