
Editorial: If It Is in This Issue, It Is Still Unpublished

In your hands is the March 2006 issue of *The Journal of Chiropractic Education*. Its content, by weight, consists almost entirely of the proceedings of the 2006 meeting of the Association of Chiropractic Colleges (ACC). That body of material represents an immense volume of activity, on the part of authors, peer reviewers, conference organizers, and various editors. The contents of this issue also represents other values beyond the meeting. I would like to express my opinions on some of the values that these proceedings have been mistaken to represent over time.

The presentations at this ACC conference have been subjected to a peer-review process, as has been the case for all such conferences since at least 1999 (I have no knowledge of the process prior to beginning my tenure as JCE editor). Inclusion in these proceedings indicates that the peer reviewers collectively recommended that these presentations should be given presentation time at the conference, and that the author(s) indicated an intent to accept the invitation to present. An abstract of each presentation is then published here. The existence of a blinded peer-review process and the subsequent publication of the abstract have apparently led some to equate the presence of an abstract in these conference proceedings with a formal peer-reviewed publication. This would be a faulty conclusion.

The process of publication of a full manuscript is fundamentally different from the process of having an abstract published in these proceedings. The review process for full abstracts is iterative; it is the exception rather than the rule that articles are accepted for publication without multiple reviews and revisions, a process that is instrumental in achieving higher quality scientific literature. The timeline for this conference does not permit a process of this type, and it would not be possible to have conference content at the “cutting edge” of the development of the profession if we imposed such a process.

As a result, the abstracts here represent the “first stab” of the author(s) at presenting their work, rather than a finished scholarly work. While many of the presentations herein appear to be of high quality, many others include fundamental errors that would be unacceptable in a formal publication. Errors include faulty assumptions, stated objectives or conclusions unrelated to the study design or data presented, or complete omission of all actual results. I make this observation not to suggest that the intellectual inquiries reported here should be devalued, but to caution against the error of viewing these works as equivalent to full publications.

There is an appearance that some faculty members view the publication process as complete after the abstract is published. This is based on the paired observations that the overwhelming majority of presentations appearing in the proceedings of ACC conferences never lead to full formal publication, and that for a fairly significant fraction of regular ACC contributors, abstracts in proceedings constitute most (or even all) of their public record of scholarly output. This may be a reflection of the relative lack of a culture of scholarship within chiropractic

educational institutions, of absurdly high teaching loads relative to other sectors of higher education, of those evaluating faculty performance erroneously equating these abstracts with formal publication, or a combination of factors.

Perhaps the most disturbing application of proceeding abstracts involves those that report on research into proprietary products for therapy or patient assessment. It is not the research itself but the manner in which published abstracts are utilized in product marketing or promotion that is troubling. Relatively low-quality or narrow-focus research on proprietary products or methods is often presented with rather broad and positive conclusions, and is subsequently inappropriately cited as research evidence that the product or method is safe, reliable, or effective. No ACC meeting abstract should ever be viewed as sufficient evidence for clinical decision making. Such evidence-based decisions should be based on full, formal, peer-review publications that include actual results, full descriptions of methods, and reasonable discussion of the generalizability (or lack thereof) of results.

In summary, I urge those who engaged in clinical or educational research within our profession to complete the publication process in an appropriate venue. Your work is too important to be left incomplete. I also urge consumers of literature to recognize that presentation abstracts are not equivalent to, nor a substitute for, formal publication, and should be viewed as a preview to the actual research product.

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