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‘Infodemic’ of COVID-19 pandemic

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Dear Editor,

We congratulate the authors for providing a comprehensive summary of publications in the first 13 weeks since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic (1). The authors have rightly used the term ‘infodemic’ in their title, as it applies very aptly to the current scenario of publications related to COVID-19, The infodemic literally means “an excessive amount of information concerning a problem such that the solution is made more difficult”. We would like to share more insight on this subject. While the authors have only looked at the number of publications in the first 13 weeks, we have looked at the publications for the first 17 weeks (until 25th April 2020), in a recent review article (2). Looking at the week by week publications, we found a massive surge after the 13th week of the year. Though the number of articles published per week was high but was below 500 up to 13 weeks, the next four weeks recorded numbers of 9, 42, 1014, 1493 and 1638 sequentially. The last week of our study alone clocked numbers near to the total publications of 1741 in the given study.

The search strategy of the authors included many keywords and then they excluded articles that did not have a primary focus on COVID19, whereas we focused only on those articles with SARS-Cov-2 OR COVID-19. The contrast in the total numbers between their study of 1741 and ours with 6831, just over three weeks apart, shows the pace at which the ‘infodemic’ is growing. Currently, as on 15/5/2020, the total number of publications with our strategy stands at 12,654 with 6946 free full text articles. To get an idea of the magnitude of publications from within the orthopaedic literature, comparison may be done, for example, with 40 years of publications on Anterior Cruciate Ligament (ACL) until the end of 2018 (3) were a total of only 18,696. We have also noticed that the number of journals publishing on COVID-19

are significantly more (1430), as compared to the other topics (447).

The comparative graph of publications, with the numbers of global COVID-19 cases and the comparison, including statistical testing of publications of primary research in journals are very useful features given in this article. The top five journals publishing on this topic were the same in both of our studies, including the top journal which is the BMJ. However, their order differed between the two studies. This indicates that authors preferred top, high indexed journals for publications on this topic since they have a wider readership and it was perhaps easier to publish in these journals on the topics related to the current crisis.

In contrast, in an earlier study (4) done from 14 Jan 2020 to 29 Feb 2020, only 183 publications were found on this topic in a mere 80 journals. The current numbers in comparison to this earlier study show an exponential growth. In addition to general numbers, we also looked at those studies published by Orthopaedic journals and we found JBJS (Am) has published the most, followed by JAAOS (2). For the rate at which the publications are done on this topic, we believe that the search engines like PubMed would need a tool for finer search within the year on the timeline. Such a tool would be useful for searching publications within a month or a week of the year. Currently, the tool given can only filter studies based on year of publication.

We conclude by stating that not only this pandemic has given opportunity to the researchers to publish on this crisis exorbitantly, and most of journals have seen an exponential rise in the new submissions, in the last two months, during the peak of COVID-19 (5, 6). It is perhaps because of an extensive lockdown globally and thus allowing them enough time to complete their pending papers and to do the new research and writing!

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