

Review Article

Editorial process and activity of EMERGENCIAS

Ò. Miró, G. Burillo-Putze, S. Tomás Vecina, A. Pacheco Rodríguez, M. Sánchez Sánchez

EMERGENCIAS EDITORIAL COMMITTEE.

ABSTRACT

The present review examines the main editorial steps in a scientific journal generally and in EMERGENCIAS more particularly. A number of parameters of EMERGENCIAS' editorial activity over the last four years (2003-2006) are analysed. Over that period 466 submissions were received, but only 20% of them were originally submitted for the "Originals" category. The overall acceptance index over those four years was 73%, the reviewer assignment time 26 days, the reviewer response time 42 days, the time to a final decision 55 days and the time to publication of the accepted submissions 102 days. The trends of all these parameters over the four-year period have been analysed. The main conclusion is that areas for improvement can be detected in the editorial process of EMERGENCIAS, and particularly so in the areas relating to editorial times and delays.

Key Words: Editorial processing. Editorial activity. Review process.

RESUMEN

Proceso y actividad editorial de EMERGENCIAS

La presente revisión repasa los principales pasos editoriales de una revista científica en general y de EMERGENCIAS en particular. Se analizan diferentes parámetros de la actividad editorial llevada a cabo por EMERGENCIAS durante los últimos 4 años (2003-2006). Se recibieron durante dicho período 466 manuscritos, de los que sólo el 20% estaban dirigidos a la categoría de originales. El índice de aceptación global durante esos años ha sido del 73%, el tiempo de asignación de revisores de 26 días, el de respuesta de los mismos de 42 días, el tiempo para toma final de decisión de 55 días y el tiempo para publicación de los manuscritos aceptados fue de 102 días. Se han analizado las tendencias de todos estos parámetros durante dicho período de 4 años. Como principal conclusión puede afirmarse que en el proceso editorial de EMERGENCIAS se identifican áreas de mejora, especialmente las relacionadas con los tiempos editoriales.

Palabras clave: Proceso editorial. Actividad editorial. Proceso de revisión.

INTRODUCTION

The research process begins with the detailed examination of the problem under consideration and a hypothesis presented as the solution thereof. This is followed by the design of the study, the performance of experiments and/or observations, statistical analysis of results and interpretation thereof, and the drafting of a document highlighting main conclusions. Finally, the document is sent, usually via a scientific journal, to other experts working in the same research fields, for assessment of reliability, scientific rigour, relevance and repercussion of such experiments. As a scientific journal specializing in the field of medical emergencies, at this final stage EMERGENCIAS is the main player as the recipient of the labours of many researchers.

The publication of articles in biomedical journals continues to be the most important medium for disseminating information on medical advancements and for keeping professionals up to date. Contrary to what happens in oral communication, written communication in specialized journals and books is subjected to a number of filters and reviews that help to ensure the quality and veracity, and in fact no scientific contention can be deemed truly validated until it is published in a biomedical journal^{1,2}. In order to adapt to this framework, the editorial development of biomedical journals undergoes constant renewal and adaptation processes aiming at survival in the highly competitive world of publication of biomedical articles^{1,3}.

The process, which begins with the arrival of a manuscript to the editorial office of a journal such as EMERGENCIAS and ends with publication, is long, complex and, in the eyes of tho-

Correspondence: Òscar Miró
Servicio de Urgencias
Hospital Clínic
Villaruel, 170
08036 Barcelona
E-mail: omiro@clinc.ub.es

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MANUSCRIPT SUBMISSION AND AUTHORSHIP

to a sufficient degree in the different phases so as to be considered an author thereof (for information on such conditions, see reference 2); that they have all read and approved the final version; and that any conflict of interest which might arise is stated, either in the manuscript itself or in the attached letter to the Editor-in-Chief. Generally, a conflict of interest is deemed to be any relationship existing between the authors and other individuals, companies or institutions which, if not mentioned in the manuscript at the time of publication and were to subsequently arise, could have an adverse effect on the credibility of the work or its authors³. All authors should bear in mind that when signing a work they assume responsibility for the form and content thereof, undertaking to defend it if necessary. Finally, something of which manuscript authors should always be aware is that it must be drafted in accordance with the publication guidelines or the journal to which it is addressed, as this greatly simplifies the drafting process, the editorial function and the reading of the article. Most of the biomedical journals, including EMERGENCIAS, follow the “Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals”, otherwise known as the “Vancouver rules” which, although subsequently reviewed, were first drafted in that city by the editors of the main biomedical journals⁶⁻⁸. From such publication guidelines, we must emphasize the drafting of the bibliography, in which references must follow the existing regulations, avoiding the all too frequent practice of “cutting and pasting” from the MedLine web page, as the references therein do not fully adhere to the



Vancouver bibliographical regulations. It is obvious that any article references therein must have been read by the authors in order to have extracted the conclusions or contentions supported in the text. The EMERGENCIAS Editorial Committee at this time is drafting new publication rules which will be published in a future issue.

EDITORIAL PROCESS

The arrival of the manuscript at the editorial office marks the beginning of the editorial process per se. Initially, a reference number is assigned to the work for easy identification, and is attached to the work throughout the process. Then the secretary sends the manuscript to the journal Editor-in-Chief or any persons to whom he/she delegates or with whom he/she shares responsibility of the initial assessment thereof. During this new phase, and at least at the start, this task will be shared by Guillermo Burillo and Óscar Miró, Editor and sub-Editor, respectively of EMERGENCIAS. Depending on the complexity and characteristics of the manuscript, this may be directly accepted, modified or rejected, or otherwise sent for external reviewer assessment.

Peer Review

EMERGENCIAS has been working with the peer review system for a number of years, and therefore all manuscripts considered for publication in the originals and clinical notes sections, as well as reviews, points of view and editorial commentaries not specifically requested by the editorial team, are subjected to this procedure. This process is considered to be the "gold standard" of assessment of scientific works for publication in biomedical journals yet, although the usefulness and thoroughness of this system for selection of quality articles is universally accepted, there is no reliable proof to support this assertion⁹. On the other hand, more than 50% of the manuscripts received by all other sections of EMERGENCIAS are sent to at least one external expert reviewer for opinion thereon.

It must be pointed out that in this process the reviewer's role is FUNDAMENTAL. External reviewers are professionals selected on the basis of their scientific production and degree of experience in a particular field. The ideal reviewer should be under 40 years of age, have research experience, basic knowledge of methodology and statistics, be known by the Editorial Committee and belong to institutions of scientific prestige³. In articles containing complex statistical analyses it is occasionally important to include expert reviewers in scientific methodology¹⁰.

Existing criteria for assessment of the quality of a paper are not always properly defined, uniform or universal, although it helps to use a checklist for quantitative determination of its overall quality and of each of the various sections normally making up the structure of a manuscript (Manuscript Quality Assessment Instrument, Checklist or similar)^{3,11-13}. The performance of a correct critique is not an easy task, although there are manuals and articles available for assistance¹⁴⁻¹⁶. The tone must always be constructive and should help, even in the event of an unfavourable reviewer recommendation, to correct any repairable aspects. One of the most controversial points of the expert review process concerns its confidentiality. By and large, in most of the biomedical journals the authors are not informed of the reviewer's identity, although normally the reviewer does know the identity of the authors, particularly in publications abroad. In our country, however, the process is usually double-blind, and neither the author nor the reviewer knows of each other's identity. This is the strategy used in EMERGENCIAS. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that some journals actually ask the author which reviewers he/she considers most appropriate to review the work, as well as any with whom he/she may have a conflict of interest (personal or scientific). Confidentiality is therefore not an essential aspect in the expert review process, although it falls beyond the scope of this review to analyse the pros and cons thereof^{3,14-16}.

Editorial decision (acceptance, modification or rejection)

The final decision of acceptance or rejection is made on the basis of the reports received, of which the authors are then informed (in the event of rejection, reviewer comments are always attached). If the manuscript contains confusing or improvable points these are mentioned to the authors for clarification thereof in a revised draft. This process may occasionally be relatively protracted in the event of requiring statistical reassessment of results or inclusion of new elements, patients or experiments in the work. In any event, the final aim of this exchange of opinions is to improve the quality of the work, either for publication in EMERGENCIAS, if finally accepted, or in another journal, if it is rejected.

Publication

Once the manuscript has been accepted, a new phase begins which basically depends on the technical editorial team. This is an important part of the editorial process, during which



an in-depth style review is carried out for two reasons: to adapt the work to the general scientific publication guidelines and to ensure its adherence to the specific regulations for article publication of the specific journal. This editorial process is currently carried out by SANED, with whom EMERGENCIAS has had a longstanding collaboration and that has allowed it to grow and mature. The technical editorial team is led by Alicia Martínez, with Carmen Ibáñez and Ana Romero as Assistant Editors. The scientific and technical editorial teams meet on a regular basis to exchange opinions and discuss the operation of the journal. At this stage the team works with a graduate in Spanish language and expert in the edition of medical texts, in charge of correcting the spelling and syntax of the article. Together with the editors, this person is also responsible for detecting errors in the bibliography and ensuring that the journal's homogeneity criteria are fulfilled. Andrés Pacheco and Miquel Sánchez, the two editors who have recently joined the Scientific Editorial Committee, have an active participation in this final phase of article production.

Another important task is the correct translation into English of those sections of the journal subject to translation, which in the case of EMERGENCIAS are the title of the article, the abstract and the key words. This is a critical aspect, given that when the request is made for EMERGENCIAS to be included in international journal databases, this is the part which will be most frequently read and assessed by the reviewers. The text in English is usually supplied by the authors themselves, with correction of any mistakes it may contain made during the technical editorial process. On occasions, the original English text contains so many errors that the editorial team is obliged to completely redraft it. The scientific and technical editorial teams of EMERGENCIAS have thus made a joint effort to improve such translations.

The end product of this entire technical editorial process is a series of printing proofs, normally known as galley proofs. These are sent for review by the author and the journal editor-in-chief for confirmation that the messages contained therein have not been altered in any way during the editorial process, for introduction of minimal modifications and correction of any error which might still remain. And additionally, a few hours prior to printing, the editor-in-chief will review the final appearance of the full issue with made-up pages for the final go-ahead, as the person ultimately responsible for any mistake or error in the published product. Despite performing all such tasks with the utmost to attention to detail, it is virtually impossible not to miss out some error in the final text¹⁷. This is why all journals, including EMERGENCIAS, include a 'corrections section' to correct such flaws.

Letters to the Editor or the "life" of the journal

For any corrections, clarifications or other controversies of the scientific aspects of the manuscript, one hopes for critical readers and a dynamic "Letters to the Editor" section. There is no doubt that the external reviewers and the editorial team many miss some incorrect data contended in the manuscript by the authors or that subjective or scientific opinions on some topics may differ from those of the authors¹⁸⁻²⁰. The subscribers and readers of EMERGENCIAS have a right, and indeed a duty, to inform of anything they deem scientifically wrong or debatable or simply to express points of view different to those contained in the articles. We must remember that the Letters to the Editor are not a lesser item or a filler section in the journals. In fact, this is how biomedical journals began, with physicians and scientists sharing experiences and experiments. In light of the above, the editorial team is very open to this type of mail, provided the basis for discussion is centred on strictly scientific aspects.

MONOGRAPHS IN EMERGENCIAS

At the request of the current editorial team and following the example of other biomedical journals in our field, the SEMES has created a second heading called "MONOGRAPHS IN EMERGENCIAS" to include articles, reviews, monographs and journalistic essays that could lead to a conflict of interest with the scientific integrity and independence of EMERGENCIAS. Under this heading, certain products of medical and scientific dissemination promoted by the pharmacological industry are published, with the scientific editorial team ensuring at all times that such works, perfectly legitimate and necessary, do not collide with the strictly scientific interests of EMERGENCIAS. Direct supervision of this new heading – made up essentially of commissioned articles not subject to peer review – will be the task of Santiago Tomás Vecina, sub-Editor of EMERGENCIAS.

EDITORIAL ACTIVITY

Level of acceptance

Editorial activity in a scientific journal such as EMERGENCIAS is usually significant. As such, over the last 4 (2003-2006) years our journal has received a total of 466 manuscripts for assessment, of which 20% belonged to the original works category (see Table 1). Without a doubt, ori-

TABLE 1. Editorial activity in EMERGENCIAS during the period 2003-2006 (due to rounding-up, in some columns the percentages do not add up to 100%)

	2003	2004	2005	2006	Total
Documents received	101	121	131	113	466
– Originals	22 (22%)	24 (20%)	25 (19%)	21 (19%)	92 (20%)
– Clinical notes	20 (20%)	28 (23%)	36 (27%)	32 (28%)	116 (25%)
– Letter to the Editor	21 (21%)	14 (12%)	20 (15%)	22 (19%)	77 (17%)
– Reviews	4 (4%)	7 (6%)	3 (2%)	9 (8%)	23 (5%)
– Other	34 (34%)	48 (40%)	47 (36%)	29 (26%)	158 (34%)

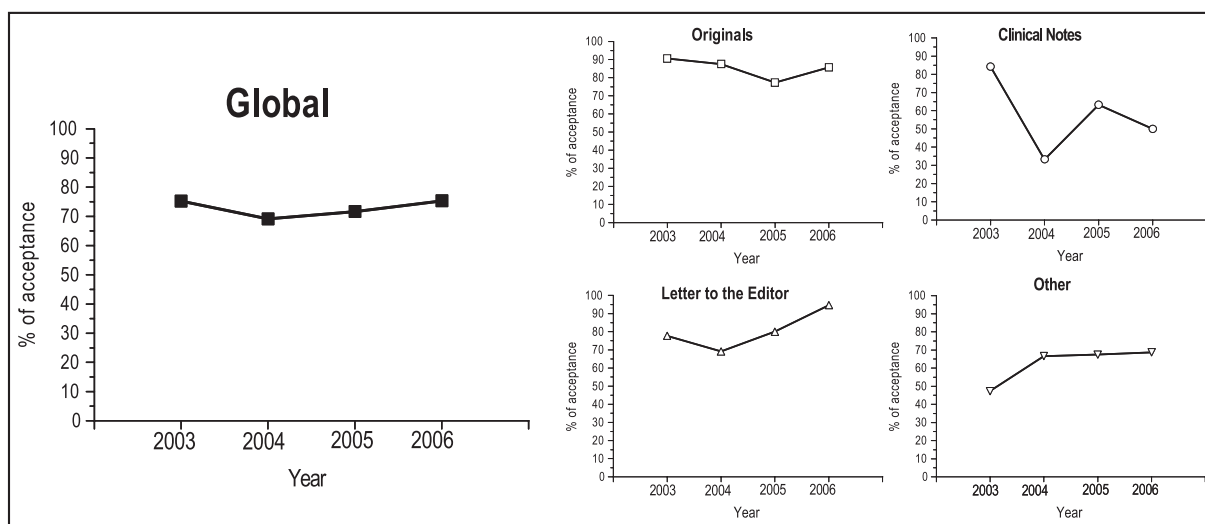
ginal works are the backbone of any scientific journal, contributing hitherto unpublished new material, providing answers to unresolved issues or perhaps discussing aspects with data discrepancies. Undoubtedly, attracting the greatest number possible of original work related to emergency medicine in order to increase the low – even at this stage – percentage thereof, is a challenge faced by the new editorial team.

Of the total number of manuscripts received, approximately 80% were finally accepted for publication in EMERGENCIAS after having been subjected to various editorial phases, although the acceptance percentage varied according to the type of work assessed, being higher for original works and Letters to the Editor, and much lower for Clinical Notes and other types of documents (Figure 2).

With regard to the trends shown during this period, we have observed that, although the global acceptance rate and that for original articles has remained very stable, the acceptance of Letters to the Editor has been on the increase, whereas that of Clinical Notes has fallen.

Publication times

A very important part of the entire process, which must be added to the overall quality thereof, is the time taken up by such a process. It is evident that science is progressing at a speedy rate and, as such, what today may be relevant or new, may not be so tomorrow. Hence, the process of obtaining scientific results and the dissemination of such results in a scientific journal must be done as quickly as possible. Furthermore, there is a second reason for requiring such speed, that the respect for the authors who, understandably, fail to comprehend the delays that sometimes take place in the assessment of their manuscripts. From a detailed analysis of Figure 1 one can deduce that editorial times depend on many factors and several people in charge. With the aim of uniformly grouping together the EMERGENCIAS editorial times in, we have divided these into four main stages, which are shown graphically in Figure 3: time for reviewer assignment, reviewer response time, time taken for final editorial decision and time for publication. Different factors and players intervene at each stage, and thus, steps taken to shorten

**Figure 2. Acceptance rates of articles received by EMERGENCIAS during the period 2003-2006.**

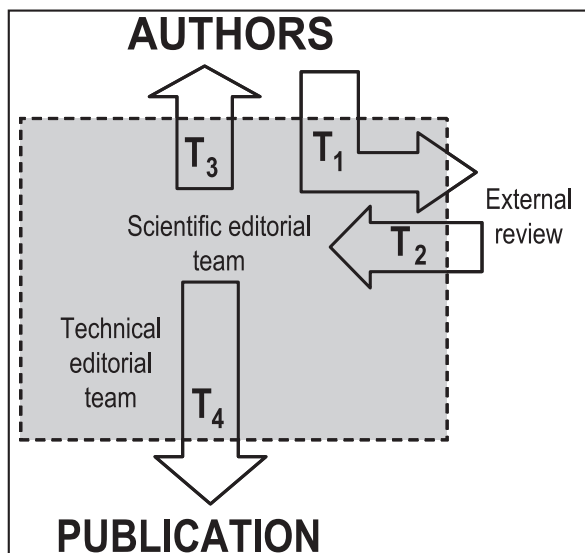


Figure 3. Main times into which the editorial process of an article can be broken down. T₁: Time for reviewer assignment. T₂: Reviewer response time. T₃: Time taken for final editorial decision. T₄: Time for publication.

times may also differ. These are analysed in greater detail below.

Firstly, time for reviewer assignment depends exclusively on the relationship and type of communication existing between the journal's editorial office and the Editor-in-Chief. During this period (2003-2006), the time taken for reviewer assignment was of 26 days, very similar throughout irrespective of the type of article in question (Figure 4), and did not vary substantially over these 4 years. (Figure 5)

This is an aspect that clearly must be improved in the near future.

On the other hand, reviewer response time depends almost exclusively on the reviewers, although a proactive approach by the editorial office to request the review from any which may be delayed could be of great assistance. Most biomedical journals agree on an optimum review time of 2 weeks – 3 at the most – and make this known to the reviewer when the article review is commissioned. During the period of analysis, the average time was 42 days, although a significant improvement was shown over this four-year period. This time is longer in the case of original manuscripts, which are the most valued by the journal, although their review process is the most technically complex due to the structure of the study. The editorial team's attitude in the face of a delay exceeding such optimum times can vary, ranging from insisting and waiting for the reviewer's report, assigning it to another reviewer (and thus having to wait for his response) or, if another reviewer report is available and the some member of the editorial team has some knowledge of the research topic, taking a decision on this basis.

The time taken for a final editorial decision is probably the most heterogeneous of those analysed. There will therefore be quick decisions taken on some manuscripts (particularly if rejected) whereas others (most of those during the period of analysis) will involve a dialogue between the Editor-in-Chief and the authors with correspondence interchange over some time, especially if important changes in the structure or drafting of the article are requested. This time was of 55 days in EMERGENCIAS during the period 2003-2006, with a tendency to increase over the period. Overall, a considerably longer time was taken for original manuscripts compared to non-originals, and this was longer for manuscripts finally accepted than for those rejected.

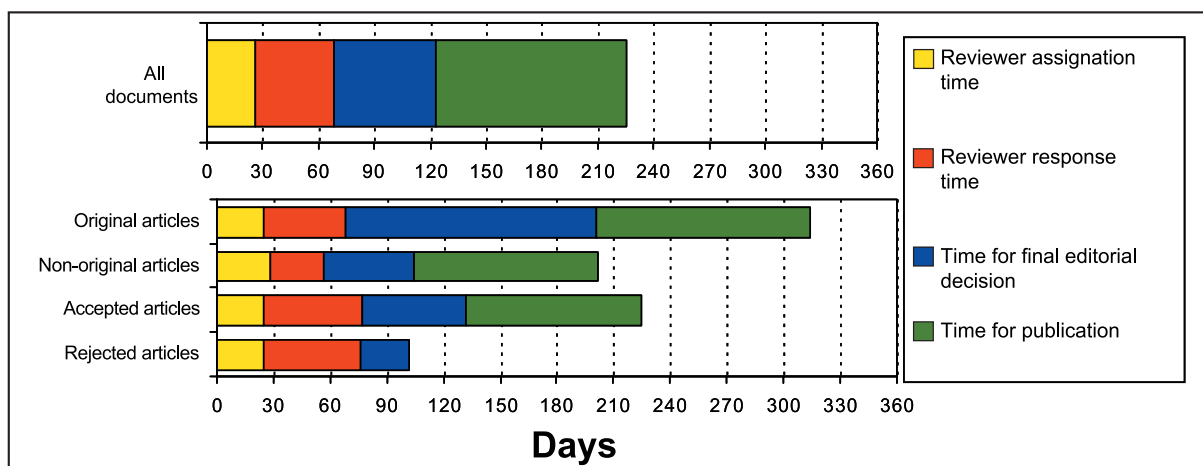


Figure 4. Editorial times in EMERGENCIAS during the period 2003-2006 for all documents (above) and other subgroups (below).

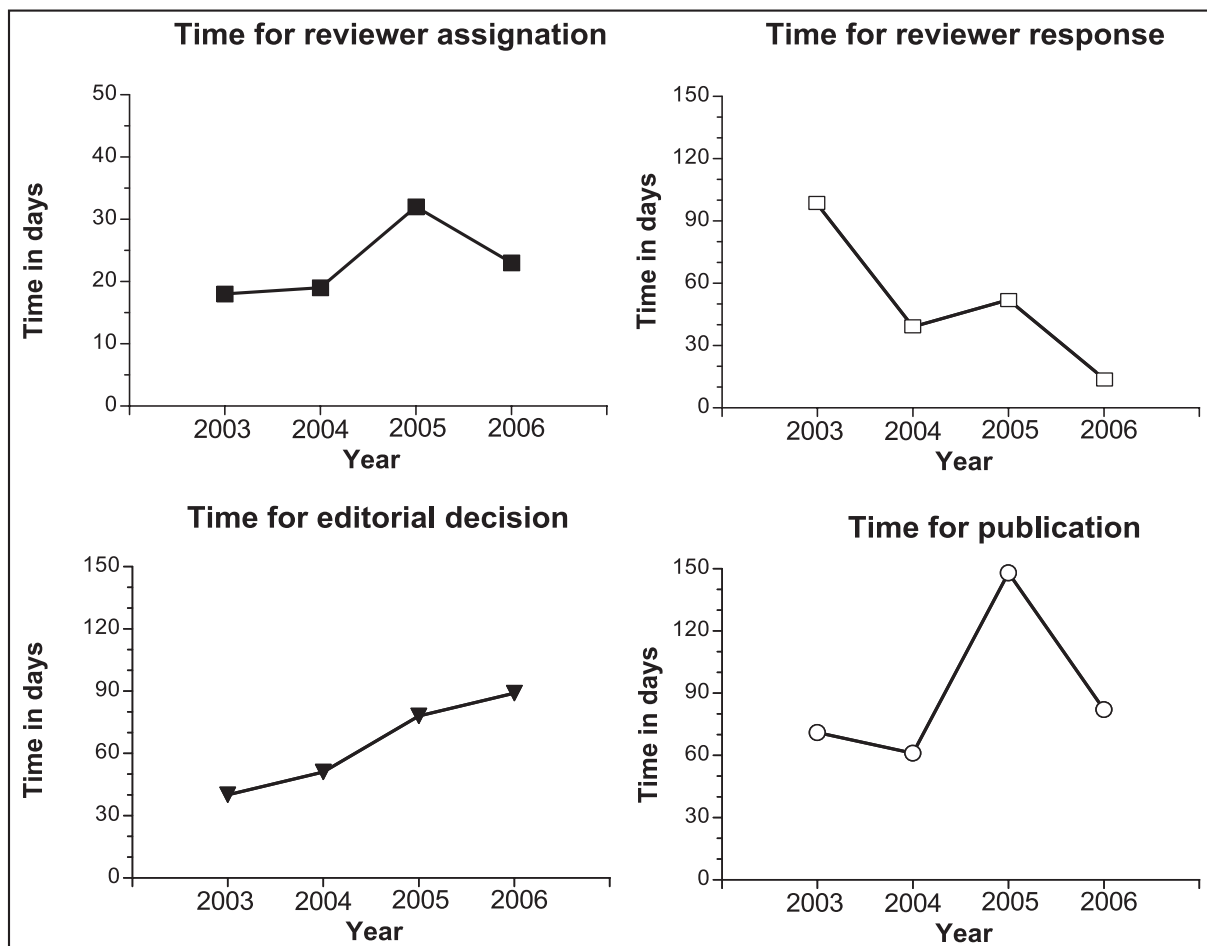


Figure 5. Evolution of the different editorial times throughout the period 2003-2006.

Many biomedical journals currently use a system totally based on the internet for this multidirectional communication flow between the editorial office, the Editor-in-Chief, the reviewers and the authors, thus significantly shortening the times analysed. In the near future EMERGENCIAS must consider the incorporation of an editorial system such as this one as a step towards improving these timelines.

Lastly, the time to publication is one in which authors, reviewers and Editor-in-Chiefs exert a minimal influence and which depends on two main facts: the speed at which the technical editorial team is able to work and the availability of space for publication. This last aspect depends directly on the number of accepted manuscripts pending publication. This is undoubtedly the factor which most affects time for publication. In our journal, which has always suffered from a certain lack of publishable material^{17,21}, this time was 102 days, with few variations over the period and full uniformity irrespective of the type of manuscript in question. Some journals occasionally group together articles on a certain topic for publication in one single

issue. As long as the delay is reasonable and there is available material, EMERGENCIAS will follow this policy. Likewise, the Editorial Committee is considering the possibility of creating specific topical sections, although these might not appear with fixed regularity.

The sum of these four time sequences is the total time spent on the editorial process of an article in the EMERGENCIAS journal, which on average was of 225 days during the 2003-2006 period. As in any editorial analysis, this only enable us to view the current situation, identify areas for improvement and allows us to assess the impact of any decision taken over time. As a reference, Table 2 shows a few main editorial parameters of some journals in our country that have also analysed times^{22,23}.

The current editorial team has the advantage of the upcoming recognition of our medical specialty, which will lead to an increase in research activity. Nonetheless, it is evident that something is already under way. As shown by the results of recent works, the desire for research of Spanish emergencists^{24,25}



TABLE 2. Comparison of various editorial parameters of EMERGENCIAS during the 2003-2006 period with those of other Spanish medical publications

	Ref.	Manuscripts received p/a	% acceptance	% original	Reviewer response times (days)	Total editorial time (days)	Period analyzed
Enfermedades Infecciosas y Microbiología Clínica	22	256	65	50	-	Aprox. 150	2002-2005
Revista Española de Cardiología	23	280	41	44	29	344	2003
EMERGENCIAS	Current work	116	73	20	42	225	2003-2006

and their scientific production^{9,26,27} are undergoing continuous growth, much higher than in other specialties. We can therefore expect that in the next few years EMERGENCIAS will receive

a substantial part of this activity, will channel it and, at the same time, will take advantage of the growth experienced by research in our specialty. *Quid pro quo*.

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