

## Editorial

### MMJ publication delays: a plea and an apology

Simon Attard Montalto

Both authors and readers of the Malta Medical Journal would have noticed that the editorial process has been unduly slow over the past few months. Unfortunately, this observation is correct and, unusually, this delay is not entirely all due to repercussions from COVID! There have been numerous issues that have contributed to a slowing down in manuscript turnover, most beyond the control of the editorial Board.

Paradoxically, the first reason follows a positive development in that the MMJ is receiving many more submissions for possible acceptance for publication. All manuscripts are required to go through the editorial process, although a minority do not proceed beyond an initial vetting exercise at editorial level. These would include, for example, those papers found to bear an unacceptable 'likeness' to other previously published work after scrutiny by *Turnitin* (NB: ALL submitted papers are screened for plagiarism), non-exceptional case reports, or papers with little reference to the local scene. This weeding out process eliminates only a small percentage of submissions not exceeding 25%, and means that the vast majority of papers are sent out to referees. The increased number of submissions adds extra pressure on the editorial team. The latter is a finite group of volunteers who, without exception, all have other full and/or part-time jobs, and dedicate time to the MMJ *oltre* these commitments. Furthermore, the editorial team has not expanded to cater for this increased workload: indeed, unforeseen constraints on some staff members have, if anything, decreased their availability to the MMJ.

The increased number of submissions translates into a greater demand for referees, invariably the bottle neck of the editorial process and the greatest determinant of manuscript delays. A recent open call from the MMJ for motivated colleagues to submit their willingness to act as referees was encouraging, and increased the referee bank by 28 individuals. This is nowhere near enough and still leaves some

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#### Cover Picture:

'Sqaq biswiet Misrah San Frangisk, Qormi'

*Watercolours*

By Christian Camilleri

Christian Camilleri is an anaesthetist who began painting in childhood. His preferred medium and subject consist of watercolour figures, portraits, rural and battle scenes. He derives inspiration from both Baroque and early 20th Century sources.

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particularly problematic specialties without any names on the MMJ's list of potential referees. Delays for papers submitted within these specialties are now facing turnaround times of well over twelve months. Pleas to their respective academic Heads of Department are generally unheeded and written requests left unanswered. Authors submitting such papers are being informed about severe delays within their specialty, rather akin to Public Health warnings on tobacco advertising and, in some instances, have been asked to name potential referees for their paper.

Presently, the MMJ has overcome or, at least, ameliorated some of the problems mentioned above and work to clear the backlog has picked up. Nevertheless, the group of papers currently at the end of the editorial process and virtually 'ready to go'

still surpasses three full issues of the MMJ, thereby condemning those further down the line and any new submissions to a lengthy timeline before they may appear in print!

Potential authors are very eager to get their work published and generally don't hold back to badger members of the editorial board for 'updates'. I would encourage that, if asked to contribute from the other side of the fence and review a paper, they should apply the same level of eagerness, pull out the stops and go that extra mile to support the MMJ. A decent review will take around an hour to an hour and a half to complete and, at most, such requests will materialise a few times per year. Surely this is not a massive 'ask' and should not be beyond the capabilities of most academics.