

Readers' opinion about English original articles in *Ugeskrift for Læger*

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: The Danish Medical Association performed a survey together with TNS Gallup Denmark among the readers of *Ugeskrift for Læger* (Journal of the Danish Medical Association). The main motivation for the questionnaire was to evaluate the acceptability of changing the publication language in original articles from Danish into English.

MATERIAL AND METHODS: The study was conducted as an on-line questionnaire among the members of the DMA. A systematic sample was drawn from the Danish Medical Association's member database. The sample comprised a total of 1,970 e-mail addresses. Among these, 1,952 were valid, and 1,952 physicians were invited to participate by e-mail.

RESULTS: The response rate (1,046/1,952) was 54%. Among the participants, 43% were specialists, 36% were junior doctors and 20% general practitioners. Overall, 45% of the respondents publish scientific articles, and particularly specialists and junior doctors did not object to the shift from Danish to English language.

CONCLUSION: Our survey showed that the readers and authors were willing to accept a shift from Danish into English publication language for original research papers.

English ranks third among the world's languages in terms of the number of native speakers [1]. In terms of people speaking English as their native or second language, English ranks first or second [2]. In medicine, English is the most common language in scientific journals. Thus, 78.7% of all journals indexed in PubMed are in English [3]. Scientific articles written in languages other than English will be of value to fewer and fewer potential readers compared with articles written in English.

The Journal of the Danish Medical Association (*Ugeskrift for Læger* (UFL)) is a weekly scientific journal published by the Danish Medical Association (DMA). Starting regular circulation in 1839, it is one of the oldest in the world. The contents of the journal has always been in Danish, and the readers of the UFL count mainly the approximately 25,000 MDs in Denmark, who are members of the DMA. As from September 2009, the UFL has only accepted original articles provided they were written in English. Original articles are no longer published in the printed version of the UFL. Instead they are

published on-line in the Danish Medical Bulletin (DMB), but a Danish summary will be published in the UFL.

The DMA wanted to assess the likely impact of this practise on DMA members' submission of original articles for publication. To this end, the DMA in cooperation with TNS Gallup Denmark has conducted a survey among the members of the DMA.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Study design

The study was initiated by the Danish Medical Association (DMA) and conducted by TNS Gallup Denmark. The study was conducted as an on-line questionnaire among the members of the DMA.

The DMA specified which topics should be raised. The questions were formulated by TNS Gallup Denmark in collaboration with the UFL.

More than 97% of the physicians working in Denmark are members of the DMA. The DMA has approximately 25,000 members who are either specialists, junior doctors or general practitioners. Based on the number of members in June 2009, 980 completed questionnaires were, according to TNS Gallup Denmark, needed to obtain representative study results.

This number was based on TNS Gallup Denmark's knowledge from similar studies. The DMA membership database contains the e-mail addresses of approximately 80% of DMA members. Among the 1,970 e-mail addresses collected from this database, a total of 1,952 were valid. To obtain 980 respondents, every twelfth name in each of the three groups (specialists, junior doctors and general practitioners) was chosen and entered into a spreadsheet. This spreadsheet served as the basic database of the study.

Data collection

The respondents answered the questionnaire via the on-line platform CAWI (computer-assisted web interviewing). In September 2009, they received an invitation via e-mail to participate in the study. They were informed that it would take approx. eight minutes to answer the questionnaire. Those who did not respond to the first invitation were sent up to three reminders. Three weeks after initiation of the study, the questionnaire was closed.

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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TNS Gallup received 1,970 e-mail addresses from the members' database. Out of the 8,934 specialist members, 750 e-mail addresses were collected. Out of the 10,077 junior doctor members, 820 e-mail addresses were collected, and among the 4,827 general practitioner members, a total of 400 e-mail addresses were collected.

Results

In total, 1,046 questionnaires were returned of which 953 were completed in full. The 1,046 physicians answered the final question of the questionnaire, meaning that they had considered all the questions. Consequently, the response rate (1,046/1,952) was 54%. When calculating the number of physicians who followed the link, i.e. started the questionnaire, the response rate was 73%, but we chose only to include questionnaires where the last question was answered, which gave an overall response rate of 54%. Among the participants responding to the final question, 43% were specialists, 36% were junior doctors and 20% were general practitioners. This distribution closely mirrors the distribution of members in the DMA. Among the respondents, 58% were male (58% in the DMA) and 42% were female (42% in the DMA).

To the question of whether the respondents publish scientific articles, 45% answered "Yes", 54% answered "No", and 1% "Don't know". The distribution between the different subgroups is shown in **Figure 1**, where it appears that general practitioners rarely publish scientific articles.

As from September 2009, only original articles written in English have been accepted for publication. These articles are now being published on-line in the DMB. Participants in the survey were asked to which extent the decision to publish original articles in English only would affect their submission of articles to the UFL. Among the entire group of respondents, 10% answered

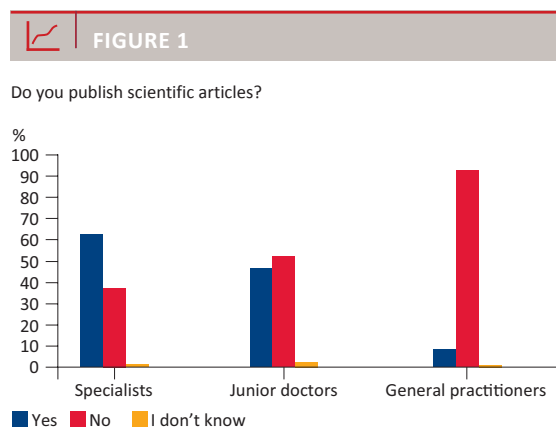


TABLE 1

From September 2009 original articles may only be submitted in English. These papers will be published in the Danish Medical Bulletin. What will this mean to you?

	Specialists, %	Junior doctors, %	General practitioners, %
I will probably submit more articles	10	10	0
I will submit the same amount as before the changes	45	52	14
I will probably submit fewer articles	9	4	0
I will probably not submit papers in English	12	7	36
I don't know	24	27	50
Total	100	100	100

that they would likely submit more articles, 46% were likely to submit the same amount of articles as before, while 7% answered that they would probably submit fewer articles; another 11% answered that they would be likely not to submit articles in English, and, finally, 26% answered »Don't know«. The distribution between the three subgroups is shown in **Table 1**. Overall, specialists and junior doctors were more favourable towards the shift from Danish into English than were general practitioners.

DISCUSSION

The main findings in the present survey were that about half of a randomly chosen sample of specialists and junior doctors in Denmark are active writers of scientific articles as opposed to about only 7% of general practitioners. Specialists and junior doctors seem to welcome the shift from Danish to English language in original articles that are now published in the DMB.

The decision to stop publishing original articles in Danish [4] was taken mainly for ethical reasons. Thus, the publication of scientific results in a national language accessible to only five to six million people worldwide effectively prevents the much wider international scientific community from gaining access to these results. Moreover, such practice runs counter to the Helsinki Declaration which stipulates that scientific data shall, indeed, be made publically available [5]. We simply do not consider that data are publically available if published only in Danish.

We are not the only journal to change language. Thus, the Swiss Medical Weekly recently changed from their multilingual tradition in Schweizerische Medizinische Wochenschrift into an English-only journal. This was done to reach more European authors and more readers worldwide [6]. As Danish original research will now be published in English, we hope to reach more

readers worldwide and that the DMB will appeal to a wider, international authorship.

The overall response rate was 54%, but this rate was calculated in a very rigorous way as we only included respondents who also answered the final question of the questionnaire. If we had also included physicians who just opened the link, i.e. started the interview, the response rate would have been 73%. We felt, however, that it would provide a more accurate result to only include data from respondents who completed the entire questionnaire. According to TNS Gallup Denmark, a response rate of 54% is very high. When performing similar web-based interviews drawing on their large Access Panel (Gallup Forum) consisting of 40,000 professional respondents, their response rates range from 10% to 60%, and all members of the panel have accepted to participate in various interviews and they get paid to participate. In the present survey, the participating physicians received no incentive to participate and a response rate of 54% must therefore, according to TNS Gallup Denmark, be considered acceptable.

In conclusion, our survey showed that Danish specialists and junior doctors, who were the main contributors to the UFL, readily accept the shift from Danish into English publication language for original research papers now appearing in the DMB. General practitioners, however, are more reluctant to submit papers in English.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST: *Jacob Rosenberg* is a scientific editor at Ugeskrift for Læger. *Hanne Mohr Rosberg* is a sales and marketing manager at Ugeskrift for Læger.

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