Frequency and characteristics of letters to the editor published in *Farmacia Hospitalaria* (1995-2006)

J. Rosell Pradas, M. Lacasaña Navarro

*The Andalusian School of Public Health. Granada, Spain*

**Resumen**

**Objetivo:** Describir la frecuencia y las características bibliográficas de las cartas al director publicadas en *Farmacia Hospitalaria* entre 1995 y 2006.

**Método:** Estudio descriptivo y transversal sobre documentos clasificados como cartas al director publicados en el periodo interanual 1995-2006.

Utilizando como fuentes los ejemplares de las revistas se identificaron las siguientes variables: número de cartas/año, contenido de fondo, extensión del texto en palabras, idioma, utilización de recursos gráficos, número de firmantes y su perfil profesional, número de instituciones participantes, origen por autonomías, número de referencias bibliográficas y origen documental de las mismas. Se empleó estadística descriptiva.

**Resultados:** Se identificaron 82 cartas, con una media de 7 por año y de 1.1 por revista. Fueron más frecuentes en el último bienio, 43 cartas (52%) del total de misivas, tras su práctica ausencia entre 1998 y 2003. La mayoría 52 casos (63%) eran en relación con publicaciones o réplicas. Todas las misivas contemplaron las normas de extensión del texto, idioma o uso de recursos gráficos.

El promedio de autores fue de 3, en 12 cartas (14%) su número fue superior al permitido. En 56 casos (64%) firmaron únicamente farmacéuticos hospitalarios pero en 26 ocasiones (32%) lo hicieron junto a médicos de hospital. En el 20% de los documentos, 16 casos, los firmantes pertenecían a dos o más instituciones. Valencia, Cataluña, Madrid y Andalucía fueron los orígenes principales de las cartas.

Se recopilaron 411 referencias de apoyo. La media fue de 5 citas por carta al director, entre 0 y 15 referencias, en 17 casos (21%) se superó el tope de referencias aceptables. Del total de citas 255 (60%) correspondían a publicaciones extranjeras.

**Conclusiones:** Las cartas al director en *Farmacia Hospitalaria* aumentaron de forma importante en el último bienio del periodo estudiado tras su práctica ausencia en años anteriores. Destaca la autoría conjunta con otros profesionales de la salud y el respaldo de varias instituciones a los documentos. La observancia de las normas de publicación es la regla, con excepción del número de autores y de referencias permitidas que no son observadas con suficiente rigor.

**Palabras clave:** Cartas al director. *Farmacia Hospitalaria.*

**Summary**

**Objective:** To describe the frequency and bibliographical characteristics of letters to the editor published in the *Farmacia Hospitalaria* journal (hospital pharmacy) between 1995 and 2006.

**Method:** Descriptive and comprehensive study on documents classified as letters to the editor, which were published between 1995 and 2006.

Using journal issues as a source, the following variables were identified: number of letters/year, main content, text length (words), language, use of graphs, number of authors and their professional experience, number of participating institutions, origin in terms of autonomous community, number of bibliographical references and their origin. Descriptive statistics were used.

**Results:** A total of 82 letters were identified, with a mean of 7 per year and 1.1 per journal. They were more frequent during the last two years, 43 (52%) of the total, following their practical non-existence between 1998 and 2003. The majority of the letters, 52 (63%), were regarding clinical cases while 23 (28%) were related to publications or were replies to the letters themselves. All letters met the requirements regarding text length, language and use of graphs.

The mean number of authors was 3, and in 12 letters (14%) the limit on the number of authors was exceeded. In 56 cases (64%), the letters were written by hospital pharmacists only, however 26 (32%) were written in conjunction with hospital doctors. In 16 of the letters (20%), the authors belonged to one or more institutions. The letters mainly came from Valencia, Catalonia, Madrid and Andalusia.
A total of 411 supporting references were gathered. The mean was 5 citations per letter to the editor, between 0 and 15 references, and in 17 cases (21%), the number of references was higher than the accepted limit. Of the total citations, 255 (60%) were from foreign publications.

**Conclusions:** Letters to the editor in Farmacia Hospitalaria significantly increased during the last two years of the period studied and were practically non-existent before this. It is worth noting that many of the letters were written in collaboration with other health professionals and with the support of a number of institutions. It is compulsory that the letters meet publishing requirements, with the exception of a number of authors and references which were published without being thoroughly checked beforehand.

**Key words:** Letters to the editor. Farmacia Hospitalaria journal.

### INTRODUCTION

The majority of bio-healthcare journals include letters to the editor, written as brief comments indicating agreement, opposition or debate (conceptual, methodological, ethic or interpretative) with regards to articles which have been previously published in the journal. Innovative or original cases in normal clinical practice are also published as letters. On occasions the letters focus on professional development within the journal’s area of specialisation, issues regarding the health system and other current social, political or economic affairs related to the health sector. The pharmaceutical industry and editors of drug information leaflets review this section, particularly in pharmaceutical journals, looking for unknown paradoxical effects, atypical behaviour, efficacy evaluations or economic considerations of or interactions with drugs1,2. Many of these therapeutic leaflets include several references to letters to the editor in the bibliographical section of their reviews and updates3.

Between 1977 and 2000, 74 (5.3%) of the 1,391 articles edited in Farmacia Hospitalaria were letters to the editor4. A section which includes dynamic and participatory letters offers added value to any scientific publication5. However, restricting criteria regarding authorship, text length, use of graphs and the number of bibliographical references may limit the number of manuscripts submitted for this section of the journal1,5. Hearing the opinions of its most participatory subscribers and readers, as well as obtaining information on the characteristics of letters which have already been edited and identifying possible problems with publishing requirements6 could help healthcare journals improve in the future.

The objective of the present study is to describe the frequency and bibliographical characteristics of letters to the editor published in Farmacia Hospitalaria between 1995 and 2006.

### METHOD

Descriptive and comprehensive study of articles classified as letters to the editor published by Farmacia Hospitalaria between 1995-2006.

Volumes of the journal published between these years (volume 19 to 30) were used as sources of information. These were mainly obtained from the website (www.sefh.es) and any missing articles were requested from the Secretary of the Sociedad Española de Farmacia Hospitalaria (Spanish Society of Hospital Pharmacy).

The following variables were considered during the study: number of letters to the editor according to the year of publication, main content of the article, text length (No. of words), language the article is written in, use of graphs to support the text, number of authors and their professional experience, number of institutions from which the authors came, origin of articles in terms of autonomous community and number of supporting bibliographical references and their origin.

Only descriptive statistics were used, using the number of observations, means, intervals, frequencies and percentages, depending on the type of variable in question.

### RESULTS

—**Frequency:** A total of 82 letters to the editor were published in Farmacia Hospitalaria during the period involved in the present study. This represents a mean of 7 per year and 1.1 per journal. Figure 1 shows the annual and cumulative frequency. It is to be noted that the number increased significantly in the last two years of the study, with 43 letters (52%) published in this period, there were practically none between 1998 and 2003.

—**Formal characteristics and length:** 52 letters (63%) were regarding clinical cases (adverse events, interactions) or scientific contributions, 15 (18%) were related to publications in the journal itself (originals, editorials, reviews), while 8 (10%) were replies from the authors to these letters.

![Fig. 1. Annual and cumulative frequency of letters to the Editor in Farmacia Hospitalaria (1995-2006).](image)
and 7 (9%) were other types of articles (opinion, comments on legislation and regulations). The most frequent text length was between 251 and 500 words, 51 letters (62%). The word count in 16 of the articles (20%) was less than 250 words and 15 (18%) varied between 501 and 1,000 words. Almost all of the letters were published in Spanish, these accounted for 81 of the letters (99%) while one was written in English. The majority of the articles, 62 (76%), did not use tables or graphs to support the text. A table was used in 15 letters (18%), 6 (7%) used a graph and 3 (4%) used other types of figures (algorithm, photograph or illustration).

Authorship: The mean was 3 authors per letter; the number of authors was higher than the authorised limit in 12 letters (14%). This is shown in figure 2. Generally, in 56 cases (64%), all the authors were hospital pharmacists. On 26 occasions (32%) the letters were co-written with hospital doctors, mainly internists, neurologists, oncologists, nephrologists and psychiatrists, as well as other health professionals. Only 3 articles (4%) were supported by specialist doctors only. The majority of authors, 65 letters (80%), belonged to one hospital institution only, two healthcare organisations were involved in 13 articles (16%) and more than two institutions or centres participated in 3 of the articles (4%). The geographical location of the institutions in terms of the autonomous communities is outlined in figure 3.

Bibliographical support: The published articles were supported by a total of 411 references and the mean was 5 citations per letter to the editor, between 0 and 15 references. The number of articles according to the number of citations is highlighted in figure 4. The 8 reference limit was exceeded in 17 letters (21%) and the citations were taken from the following sources: foreign medical journals and books – 156 (38%); pharmacy journals and texts published abroad – 99 (22%); Spanish medical journals and books – 58 (14%); diverse documents from the pharmaceutical field (laws, standards, technical notes for drugs and documents from commercial companies) – 36 (9%); articles published by Farmacia Hospitalaria – 34 (8%); port-

dals and web pages – 24 (6%); finally other Spanish journals within the pharmaceutical field – 11 (3%). Very few letters cited textbooks, 24 (5.8%), or references to conferences or events which were not published in a journal, 3 (0.7%), since these were considered as not suitable for the supporting bibliography. One reference from a newspaper was identified (0.2%).

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study indicate that letters to the editor per year and journal issue more than doubled
The present study confirms that the authors correctly observe the publishing requirements with regards to format, text length and the use of tables and graphs. However, a small proportion of the articles exceeded the limit on the number of authors and bibliographical references. The editorial committee and/or the reviewers should pay particular attention to these aspects in the future.

The mean number of authors per letter in the present investigation is slightly higher than that in the period between 1977 and 2000. This may be due to the fact that some of the letters exceeded the limit on the number of authors allowed. However some aspects regarding the authors are new. The fact that other health professionals, in particular specialised doctors, supported almost a third of the letters published in conjunction with hospital pharmacists is important. This is different to other articles in the journal which are usually only written by pharmacists. The integration of pharmacists in multidisciplinary care teams, which is a recent development in the profession, is reflected in various letters published in 2005 and 2006. In this final year, other health professionals, such as nurses, managers and statisticians were incorporated as co-authors of the letters. The number of professionals from more than one institution supporting one in five letters is higher than the historical reference for the total number of journal articles, which was 16%.

Improvements were also seen in terms of the mean number of bibliographical citations, historically this was 4.6, however this may have due to the high and unsuitable number of references in some letters. The origin of these references could not be satisfactorily compared with previous periods during the journal’s publication. However, the number of English books and journals which accounted for the majority of bibliographical references in all articles published in Farmacia Hospitalaria was confirmed in the present study in terms of letters to the editor only. References deemed unsuitable by the journal were minimal and mainly textbooks. New bibliographical resources, such as newspapers appeared in the last two years of the study.

The possible forms and content of letters to the editor must be noted. The titles are often more pleasing and striking than original scientific articles. The journal’s editors can introduce a series of letters related to an original article using a common mini title in order to open the debate. Authors must be made aware of the fact that an unoriginal title such as “letter to the editor”, “reply” or even worse, “counter reply”, may prevent the article from being read. Furthermore, if such titles are used anyone accessing a secondary bibliographical database will have no idea of the content of the letters (this type of article is only referenced by its title), for example authors of drug information leaflets may want to access this type of database. Clinical cases should follow the structure requested by the journal. In the case of commentaries on previously published articles, the reference document should be fully cited in the first paragraph of the text, or as the first reference in the bibliography. The debate within this epistolary section should be open, frank, scientific and fair, however debate is the rule of the day and controversy should always be close at hand. This section of the journal is similar to an extended discussion chapter, written from the point of view of different authors. Finally, one of our challenges is to maintain a balance between objectivity and imagination, moderation and enthusiasm and above all, intellectual honesty and artificial speculation in the writing and content of the letters.

In conclusion, letters to the editor in Farmacia Hospitalaria significantly increased during the last two years of the period studied, following their practical non-existence in the years immediately before. Joint authorship with oth-
er health professionals and support from several institutions in some articles should be noted. Observance of publication requirements is the rule, with the exception of a number of published authors and references, which, on occasions, were not reviewed thoroughly enough beforehand.

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