

# A decade of growth: preserving the original meaning of research for physiotherapists

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Reflecting on the past does not only mean celebrating milestones but also understanding the path that led us to where we are today. Thirteen years have passed since our journal became a beacon for the Italian physiotherapy community. In 2011, a small visionary group of colleagues from the Società Italiana di Fisioterapia (SIF) recognized the need to foster a solid scientific culture joined to the practical wisdom of clinical experience. From this foresight, the *Italian Journal of Physiotherapy* was born.

During the formative years from 2011 to 2014, the journal entered a significant collaboration with Minerva Medica, a publisher that guided our earliest and most challenging steps in the scientific publishing world. During that period, we struggled with limited resources and low publication numbers similar to other journals, especially in the humanities and social sciences (1). This crucial phase saw the release of four journal volumes, each with four quarterly issues per year. It was a period marked by diligent learning and growth, during which the commitment of our authors, the critical insights of our reviewers, and the leadership of Roberto Gatti as editor-in-chief were pivotal in establishing the journal within the physiotherapy community. Our vision of evidence-based practice, not as a merely academic ideal but as a cornerstone of everyday clinical practice, which was first articulated in our inaugural editorial in 2011, has consistently guided our publications (2). This commitment has always been accompanied by an unwavering focus on methodological rigor and transparency in reporting, principles that are essential to scientific research and shared by the entire editorial board.

In 2015, as we aspired to be an integral part of the borderless international physiotherapy community, the *Italian Journal of Physiotherapy* began expanding from its national audience to an international stage. This expansion reached a turning point when the newly appointed editor-in-chief,

Marco Baccini, embarked on a new challenge by initiating a collaboration with BioMed Central, a large open access publisher owned by Springer Nature that produces over 250 scientific journals. The goal was to transform our “national” journal into an “international” one (3). Partnering with BMC brought numerous benefits, including increased visibility and more efficient dissemination. Most importantly, it allowed us to publish and distribute our articles under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 License (Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License), fully aligning the journal with the open science initiative (4). This collaboration also marked the relaunch of our journal as the *Archives of Physiotherapy* (AoP).

After four years, Marco Barbero was appointed as the new editor-in-chief. To ensure the highest quality and efficiency in the peer review process, the AoP board was significantly expanded to include more than 60 world-renowned experts. Additionally, the editorial board was restructured into sections reflecting some of the main areas of physiotherapy (Musculoskeletal, Neurology, Geriatrics, Research Methodology and Clinimetrics, Biomechanics, and Movement Analysis). Expert section editors, along with teams of associate editors, were appointed in each of these identified areas to lead the review process. The aim of these changes was twofold. First, we sought to improve the viability of the peer review process by redistributing the workload more evenly within the editorial board, as the number of annual submissions had exceeded the considerable figure of 100. Secondly, and more importantly, we wanted authors and readers to benefit from the expertise of specialists who could review manuscripts with clinical knowledge and experience in the areas mentioned. This effort was considered crucial to ensure the external validity and clinical utility of published papers, a key aspect that is often overlooked in peer-reviewed publications (5). Two new article types, Viewpoints and Masterclasses, were also introduced. These additions enriched the AoP by providing space for expert opinions and advanced educational content, thus fulfilling its mission to advance the field of physiotherapy. The collaboration with BMC Springer proved to be highly productive. Between 2015 and 2023, we published nine volumes comprising a total of 170 papers with an average rejection rate around 70%, a percentage in line with that of biomedical journals and not far

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from that of top-tier journals (6). These articles have accumulated over 1,300 citations, highlighting the impact and reach of our authors.

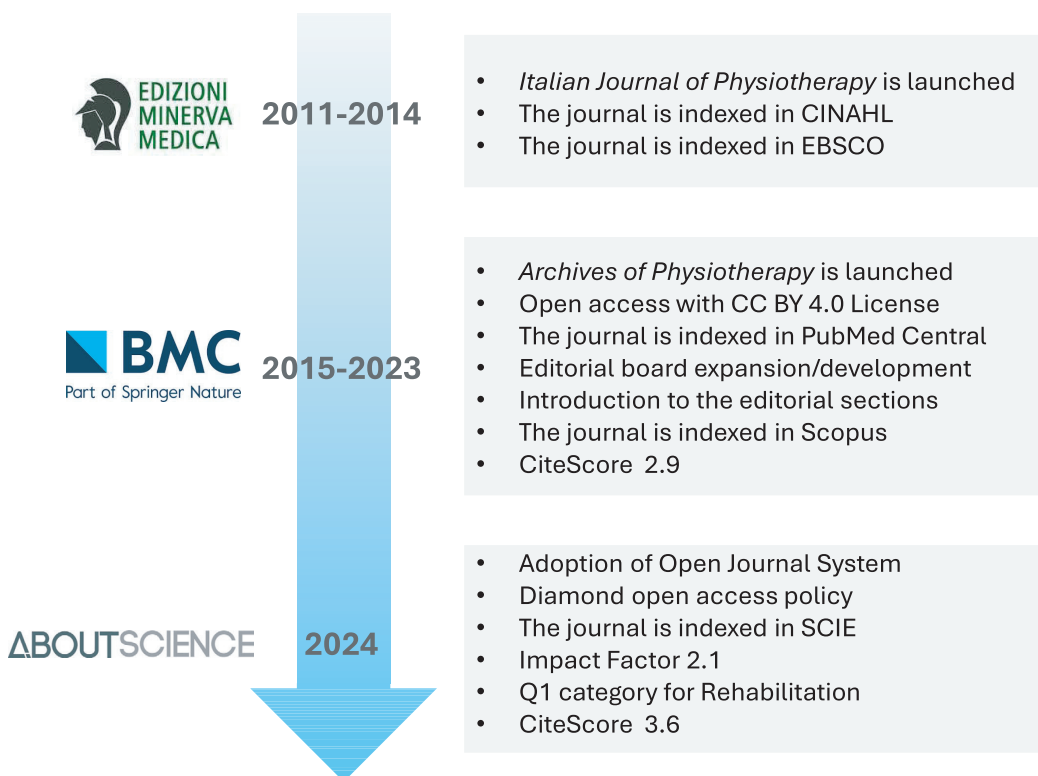
However, a partnership between a society with a single journal and a global publisher managing hundreds of journals has its own challenges, both from a financial and day-to-day editorial management perspective. Therefore, at the beginning of 2024, we ceased our collaboration with BMC Springer and transitioned to AboutScience, a smaller publisher. The adoption of the Open Journal System (OJS), an open-source platform for online journal publishing used by more than 11,500 journals in 2012 (7) and currently exceeding 25,000, was crucial to maintain the financial sustainability of our editorial enterprise. This approach has allowed us to invest more significantly in the diamond open access model, a fundamental consideration for SIF and the Editorial Board as well as for all our funding partners (Federazione Nazionale Ordine Fisioterapisti, Ordine Fisioterapisti Lombardia, Scuola universitaria professionale della Svizzera italiana, Associazione Italiana di Fisioterapia) who have made every effort to ensure that our publication remains freely accessible to all and without any publication fees for authors. Furthermore, working with a smaller publisher allows for a closer, more dynamic partnership. We anticipate that this collaboration will foster innovation and enable us to more effectively address the numerous challenges of modern scientific publishing.

The collaboration is off to a good start. In June, Clarivate announced our journal's first impact factor of 2.1 and placed AoP in the Q1 category for Rehabilitation. In addition, Elsevier's CiteScore has increased significantly, from 2.9 in 2022 to 3.6 in 2023. Both metrics underscore the growing

influence and reputation of AoP within the international physiotherapy community and positions the journal among the leading journals in the rehabilitation field.

It has been a long journey, lasting more than 10 years, fostering slow but solid growth, and we are clearly proud of this important achievement but at the same time we look to the future with awe. A speed beyond imagination has been injected into the world of scientific publishing and production has grown at impressive rates. In 2022, approximately 3.3 million scientific articles were published globally and (8) according to a recent study, the global growth rate of scientific production is such that it doubles every 17.3 years (9). The field of physiotherapy is no exception, and we must question its meaning.

Phenomena such as predatory journals, mega-journals, and paper mills are clear examples of the drifts of a market increasingly polluted by financial interests and lucrative publishing models. Predatory journals exploit researchers by charging high fees to publish their articles without providing adequate peer review, thus diluting the quality of published research (10). Meanwhile, mega-journals, which publish a vast number of articles with less rigorous selection criteria, contribute to the proliferation of less impactful research, potentially overwhelming researchers and clinicians with information of variable utility (11). Finally, paper mills produce fraudulent research for profit, often fabricating data, authorship, and entire studies, thereby undermining the integrity of scientific literature (12). The credibility of the scientific publishing world is threatened by phenomena typical of consumer-driven markets, where the relentless pursuit of growth often leads to compromises in quality. The context



**FIGURE 1** - Key milestones and achievements of the journal from 2011 to the present.

is complex and will become even more so with the inevitable adoption of artificial intelligence tools by researchers, which will boost researchers' outputs but not necessarily improve quality (13). But it is important to reflect on the fact that not only is the quality of our scientific publications in danger of being corrupted, but research itself is in danger of losing its original purpose. We view research as a unique opportunity to deeply understand the complexities of physiotherapy practice and ultimately improve our interventions. Having said that, how can we ensure that the AoP continues to uphold the original purpose of research while contributing to the improvement of clinical practice in the physiotherapy community?

It is perhaps that the greatest value we have created lies within our editorial board. Representing the physiotherapy community, our expert and dedicated board members act as gatekeepers against the market forces described earlier as originally highlighted by Zsindely and colleagues (14). Their knowledge, diversity, and expertise not only ensure the quality of the peer review process (15) but also guarantee the integrity and preservation of the original intent of the research published in AoP. This work of oversight and assurance is vitally supported by our reviewers, whose contributions are fundamental to maintaining high standards of quality in our publication. In an era where scientific production is growing at an ever-increasing rate and the risks associated with questionable editorial practices are on the rise, the role of the editorial board becomes even more crucial. Our members are not only called upon to rigorously assess the quality and validity of the research but also to serve as ethical guides, promoting a culture of transparency and responsibility. However, this priority on quality over quantity is made possible, promoted, and shared not only by our board but also by the publisher we have chosen for their commitment to these values, and by the societies that support us. In this sense, the AoP editorial board is not just a guarantor of quality but a flagship for the entire physiotherapy community, committed to upholding the value of research and safeguarding its original purpose. This collective commitment, supported and shared by our editorial partners and funders, will be essential in meeting future challenges and ensuring that the AoP continues to make a meaningful contribution to the improvement of clinical practice within the physiotherapy community. In doing so, we will also preserve the vision of the SIF and of all its original founders.

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