



Press Release

Leading British Medical Journal's Review Process Assailed

December 15, 2009—The influential British Medical Journal (BMJ) is under attack for publishing an article on global war deaths that contains “serious methodological and factual errors”.

A new study by researchers from the UK, Canada and Sweden reveals that the journal's peer review process failed to detect numerous errors in the article. The journal has not issued any substantive corrections and has rejected a request to publish a considered rebuttal.

In May 2008, the *BMJ* published, “Fifty Years of Violent War Deaths from Vietnam to Bosnia” by Dr. Ziad Obermeyer and colleagues. The article presented a detailed critique of a much-cited battle deaths dataset produced at the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO).

The *BMJ* press release promoting the publication of the Obermeyer *et al* article, stated that, “Globally, war has killed three times more people than previously estimated, and there is no evidence to support claims of a recent decline in war deaths.” But a new study, just published in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution (JCR)*, demonstrates that the article fails to substantiate either assertion and shows little understanding of the research it criticizes.

Lead authors, Professors Michael Spagat of the University of London, and Andrew Mack of the Human Security Report Project, Simon Fraser University, rejected the *BMJ*'s claim that the article, “was very thoroughly reviewed... by appropriate experts.”

“A recent in-depth analysis of the journal's peer review policy,” Spagat notes, “revealed that its own reviewers repeatedly fail to pick up major errors in manuscripts.” One of the authors of this critical study is the *BMJ*'s current editor.

The *BMJ*'s stated policy is to “publish corrections when necessary.” But after Mack emailed the journal pointing out that the Obermeyer article included six major methodological and/or factual errors, the journal failed to acknowledge any of them.

The *BMJ* encourages 400 word online “rapid responses” to journal articles. But, says Mack, “these are totally inadequate for dealing with large numbers of errors, plus they reach very few readers and do not constitute an official correction.” A proposal for a considered—and necessarily longer—rebuttal was ruled out by the journal.

There appears to be no way effectively to rebut *BMJ* articles that contain large numbers of errors. The journal thus becomes effectively unaccountable to its critics.

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A concise summary of the major errors in the BMJ article, together with links to that article, to the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* response and its Appendix, and other resources can be accessed at:

<http://www.hsrgroup.org/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=469>

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