



## Letter to the Editor - Protocol publication in evidence synthesis: structural incentives and pathways to sustainable adoption

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Dear Editor,

We read with great interest the editorial by Seixas (2026) advocating for the prospective publication of protocols as a cornerstone of rigorous evidence synthesis.<sup>1</sup> The arguments presented are compelling, and we commend *ATHENA – Health & Research Journal* for its firm commitment to publishing review protocols. However, while the editorial eloquently articulates *why* protocols should be published, we believe the discussion could be further strengthened by a more explicit engagement with the structural and economic forces that perpetuate the very low adoption rates the editorial itself laments. If only approximately 38 percent of systematic reviews report protocols,<sup>2,3</sup> and scoping reviews fare even worse,<sup>4</sup> the barriers are clearly not just cultural or educational, they are systemic.

### The financial paradox of protocol publication

The editorial acknowledges workload concerns but does not address what is arguably the most prohibitive barrier to protocol publication: cost. This phenomenon reflects what has been described as the “APC-driven stratification” of scholarly communication, whereby the capacity to publish becomes increasingly dependent on institutional purchasing power rather than solely on scientific merit. Publishing a protocol article in a reputable open access journal requires substantial article processing charges (APCs). For instance, the journal *JBIE Evidence Synthesis* charges US\$1,000 for protocol publication while *Systematic Reviews* currently charges €2,690 (US\$3,190). The median APC paid by health researchers continues to rise year after year. This means that a research team conducting a single

systematic review may need to pay between US\$5,000 and US\$7,000 in APCs alone, once for the protocol and once for the completed review, before any other research costs are considered.

This financial burden falls disproportionately on researchers in countries where research funding is limited and institutional support for publication costs is scarce or nonexistent.<sup>5,6</sup> While APC waiver policies exist, they primarily target low-income countries and are not available to researchers in many European nations, including Portugal, where research budgets are considerably smaller than those in Northern Europe or North America, yet where the country is classified as high-income. For doctoral students, early-career researchers, or small teams working without external funding, paying thousands of euros to publish a document that outlines what they intend to do, before producing any results, is a genuine deterrent. The current APC-based publishing model therefore creates an unintended misalignment between normative expectations of transparency and the economic realities faced by research teams. Under these conditions, limited uptake becomes a predictable systemic outcome rather than a reflection of insufficient researcher awareness or commitment.

### The citation penalty: a disincentive for journals and researchers

The editorial calls upon journals to support protocol publication, but it does not address the bibliometric reality that actively discourages them from doing so. Protocols are, by their nature, preparatory documents. They describe planned work rather than completed findings, and as such, they attract substantially fewer citations than completed reviews.<sup>7,8</sup>

In a publishing ecosystem where journal prestige, funding decisions, and editorial board sustainability are increasingly tethered to citation-based metrics, particularly the Journal Impact Factor (JIF), publishing protocols represents a measurable risk to a journal's bibliometric standing.<sup>9,10</sup>

This dynamic generates a structural tension between transparency-oriented publishing and metric-driven evaluation systems. Because protocols typically receive fewer citations than completed reviews, their publication may not be fully rewarded within citation-based evaluation frameworks. This reality affects not only large commercial publishers but also smaller institutional journals operating under increasing metric pressures. It is therefore unsurprising that most high-impact journals do not accept protocol manuscripts, leaving a relatively small number of dedicated outlets, and even fewer without prohibitive APCs, to shoulder this responsibility. The consequence is predictable: researchers who wish to publish protocols face limited options, often channeled toward expensive open access venues, while journals that accept protocols risk their competitive positioning.

#### **Lessons from the Portuguese and Southern European context**

*ATHENA – Health & Research Journal* deserves particular recognition as one of the very few Portuguese journals that actively publishes review protocols. In a landscape where Southern European journals often struggle for international visibility and indexation, the decision to dedicate editorial resources to protocol publication reflects a genuine commitment to methodological transparency over bibliometric self-interest. In this regard, *ATHENA's* diamond open access model illustrates how institutional commitment can counterbalance market-driven incentives, positioning transparency as a scholarly value rather than a revenue-dependent decision.

Diamond open access journals currently represent between 17,000 and 29,000 titles worldwide, yet most operate on budgets below €10,000 per year and remain underrepresented in major citation indices.<sup>11</sup> Their contribution to the scholarly ecosystem, particularly in hosting article types that commercial publishers find bibliometrically unattractive, is both essential and undervalued. The Latin American experience, where over 90 percent of open access journals operate without APCs through publicly supported platforms, demonstrates that community-driven publishing can sustain rigorous scientific communication.<sup>12,13</sup> European journals should draw inspiration from these models, and European research policy should create conditions for similar infrastructures to thrive.

#### **Toward structural solutions**

If protocol publication is to move from normative endorsement to routine practice, alignment across funding mechanisms, evaluation systems, and editorial policies is essential. We agree with the editorial that education and cultural change are necessary, but they are insufficient without accompanying structural reform. We propose that the discussion be expanded to include at least four dimensions:

First, research funders should explicitly earmark budgets for protocol publication costs. If protocol publication is to be treated as essential scientific infrastructure,<sup>14</sup> then funders should support it accordingly. National funding agencies such as the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT) in Portugal, should include protocol APCs as eligible expenses in grant budgets, rather than leaving researchers to absorb these costs personally.

Second, bibliometric frameworks must evolve to recognize the value of protocol publication without penalizing journals that host them. One approach would be to exclude protocols from JIF denominator calculations, analogous to how editorials and letters are treated. Alternatively, citation indices could develop specific metrics for methodological contribution that reward transparency-oriented publishing.<sup>9</sup>

Third, the distinction between registry-based and journal-based protocol publication should be leveraged strategically rather than hierarchically. PROSPERO and OSF registrations provide transparency with minimal cost and delay, but they lack the peer review that improves methodological quality.<sup>2,3</sup> A pragmatic approach might involve making registry-based protocols the default expectation for all reviews, while reserving peer-reviewed protocol publication for reviews with direct implications for clinical practice or policy, where the stakes justify the additional investment of time and resources.

Fourth, the diamond open access model should be actively promoted and supported as a vehicle for protocol publication, particularly in regions where APC-based publishing creates inequitable access to scientific participation. European institutions and research councils should invest in sustainable infrastructure for diamond open access journals, recognizing their unique role in hosting article types that serve the commons rather than individual citation metrics.

#### **Conclusion**

We fully share the editorial's vision of protocol publication as standard practice. Yet, without parallel adjustments in funding models and research evaluation systems, calls for greater transparency risk placing disproportionate expectations on researchers navigating constrained institutional contexts. The consolidation of protocol publication as routine practice depends on coordinated action across journals,

fundings, indexing bodies, and research institutions to align economic and evaluative frameworks with transparency-oriented scholarship. Journals such as *ATHENA* illustrate that such alignment is possible; the next step is to ensure that these commitments are embedded within supportive and sustainable policy environments.

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