Goodbye Simple: Introducing the “Methods and Techniques for Skin Research” Series

The Oxford English Dictionary defines simple as “Easily understood or done; presenting no difficulty.” This was Barbara Gilchrest, MD’s (Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Investigative Dermatology [JID] 2012–2017) conception when she first introduced the “Research Techniques Made Simple” (RTMS) series to the JID in Fall, 2012. Her goal was to create an online-only teaching tool, largely for dermatology residents, to improve the understanding of the research techniques (PCR, flow cytometry, ELISA, clinical trial designs, confocal microscopy) used to obtain data for the papers published in JID. Edited by Kathy Schwarzenberger, MD, Oregon Health & Science University (Portland, OR), the articles were simple and short (1,500 words) and mostly written by trainees, with guidance from mentors. They went through editorial but not through peer review.

In May 2015, Dr Gilchrest decided that pairing a clinician-educator editor with an editor who is also a basic researcher with a passion for education would allow the RTMS project to develop and reach a broader audience. Arlene Ruiz de Luzuriaga, MD, PhD, The University of Chicago (Chicago, IL) worked alongside Jodi L. Johnson, PhD, Northwestern University (Chicago, IL) and the JID managerial team to overhaul the series with the introduction of an RTMS logo; standardization of instructions to authors; and probably most importantly, the introduction of peer review. There was a greater emphasis on inviting senior topic experts, but the writing of the articles remained trainee led, and many author teams can remember the fun, iterative process that we went through to produce the highest quality articles at that time. We also expanded the series to include more cutting-edge or newly employed topics, more animal model systems and clinical study methods, as well as basic research techniques.

By June 2017 when Mark Udey, MD, PhD took the helm as JID’s Editor-in-Chief (2017–2022), we were able to report the value of the RTMS series by the number of downloads and anecdotal evidence of their use. Dr Udey gave the series another overhaul by broadening the editorial team to include three experienced editors. Jodi L. Johnson, PhD continued as Coordinating Editor, and Lu Le, MD, PhD, University of Texas Southwestern (Dallas, TX) and Sara Brown, MD, PhD, The University of Edinburgh (Edinburgh, United Kingdom) became Contributing Editors.

Together, the RTMS editorial team invited more senior author topic experts to choose trainees, and we focused on balancing traditional basic, preclinical, translational, and clinical methods and techniques with cutting-edge techniques that could change the Investigative Dermatology field or drive it forward. Currently, all editors review all articles along with external topic expert peer reviewers. We have maintained the iterative developmental process of the articles so that trainees can continue to gain writing and publishing experience in a friendly environment, a key feature of the original concept of the articles that we all continue to value.

Dr Udey moved the series from online only to appearing as front material in the print JID in 2018. By 2020, Dr Udey reported being pleased with the frequencies of link access, page views, and downloads of the RTMS articles, and he encouraged their use as teaching tools (Udey and Johnson, 2020). By 2021, we reported a comprehensive analysis of citations and downloads of all 110 articles published to date, noting that some of the original articles have been cited 150–200 times (Johnson et al., 2021).

Now it is time for version 4.0 of this decade-long educational series. With our new Editor-in-Chief, Erwin Tschachler, MD, Medical University of Vienna (Vienna, Austria) taking the helm with this issue of the JID, the team has been in a collective hyperplanning mode for the past year. The entire team has agreed to remain in place, and we are now happy to welcome Maksim Plikus, PhD, The University of California Irvine (Irvine, CA) with his long-term editorial experience to our team. Because the articles on research techniques have become increasingly complex over time, we felt that the term simple no longer fits their content. The series will now be called “Methods and Techniques for Skin Research” (MTSR). We have also introduced a new, more expansive logo.

While the former logo represented connecting ideas and teaching the field of Dermatology, the new logo captures the concept of larger questions being approached in more innovative ways as developing techniques provide the necessary
tools. Cutting edge techniques are represented by circles with no lines, as we believe adoption of new techniques will drive the field forward. Although the target audience remains individuals who want to learn about the biology and pathology of the skin, we have also uncovered much evidence that the articles are read broadly outside the field of dermatology. Therefore, we are working to increase the reach of the series to an even broader audience. A new project initiated by Dr Udey and passed to Dr Tschachler will add an animated video component to the series. We welcome Ayman Grada, MD, formerly at Boston University (Boston, MA), a supportive partner of the JID as a highly cited RTMS author and Editor of JID’s “Meet the Investigator” and social media activities, who will now serve as our MTSR Video Project Editor. The editors will be reaching out to authors of MTSR articles selected for this video feature.

Other important changes at this juncture include the following:

- a focus on systems approaches to skin research; articles covering how to study each skin cell type, the best animal models for studying skin, and cutting-edge methods and techniques being applied in skin research will be featured;
- no longer requiring the MTSR title as part of the article titles, but titles must remain descriptive of the method or technique covered;
- removal of the quiz component;
- invitation of additional detailed protocols as part of at least some articles; and
- continued focus on high caliber, as with every JID article.

We are eager to work with author teams to realize our collective vision of the next era of the JID and how we can move the field of Investigative Dermatology forward through the educational efforts of the MTSR series.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors are editors of the “Methods and Techniques for Skin Research” articles and the Journal of Investigative Dermatology.

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REFERENCES