Publishing plain language summaries (PLS): successes and challenges

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BACKGROUND

- Plain language summaries (PLS) improve research accessibility and help diversify readership.[1,2]
- To identify challenges and inform possible PLS best practices, we report PLS development and publication experience from Ipsen's and Taylor & Francis' perspective.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

- We assessed the success of Ipsen's pledge to publish PLS with all company-sponsored articles reporting human data (**Panel 1**).
- Articles published July 2022 (pledge date) to October 2024 were retrospectively identified.
- We descriptively report reasons why PLS were not included, to identify barriers and potential solutions.
- We also report PLS experience from the perspective of the publishing group of one of the authors (Taylor & Francis) (**Panel 1**).

RESULTS

- Of 72 articles identified (spanning 51 journals and 16 publishers), 56 included text-based PLS positioned under the abstract, after the main content, or in supplementary materials; 19/56 were indexed in PubMed (**Panel 2**).
- Reasons why PLS were absent were: removed by journal post acceptance, article was a PLS publication (PLSP) or a separate PLSP was planned, PLS not included at submission, journal would not accept PLS (**Panel 2**).
- Taylor & Francis actively encourage PLS across their 400+ journals, but having a PLS offering remains a journal-level decision; >160 journals currently accept PLS.
- They provide online educational resources for authors and have published 1053 PLS over the 39-month analysis period.
- Reported PLS barriers include stakeholder education, limited/suitable peer review, and discoverability (**Panel 3**).
- **Panel 4** lists strategies to improve PLS development, publication, visibility, and discoverability.

CONCLUSIONS

- Ipsen experienced challenges to publishing PLS since pledging to improve their research accessibility (**Panel 5**).
- Journal limitations were the most common reason for absent PLS, therefore communication with journals/publishers may help facilitate PLS publication.
- With help from publishers, continued stakeholder education on PLS benefits should encourage more submissions and uniform offering across journals.

What are PLS

PLS are an **effective science communication tool** for sharing research using **clear, concise, non-technical**, and **jargon-free language**

Why do we need PLS

Published scientific research is often focused on a **specific readership** and is written in **complex scientific language** that can be **hard to access** and digest for many readers

What is the purpose of PLS

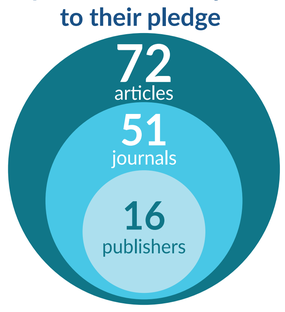
PLS help to **diversify readership**, by making the research more understandable, **thereby improving access and engagement** among interested readers[1,2]

Panel 1: Research design and methods

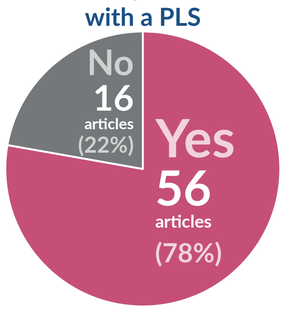
	Author (Ipsen)	Publisher (Taylor & Francis)
	Perspectives from both sides of the fence	
Data set	• Articles published July 2022 to October 2024 • Ipsen company-sponsored articles reporting human studies	• Has a portfolio of >400 medical and health journals • World-leading academic publisher committed to the highest quality scholarly publishing
Who we are		
Ipsen PLS pledge	*"From July 2022, we will publish, as a minimum, a 250-word plain language summary alongside all company-sponsored journal publications from human studies (when journal policy allows the publication of plain language summaries)"*[3]	*"Our mission is to support, validate, and connect the work of researchers and other knowledge makers, so that it can make the fullest possible contribution"*[4]
What we do		
Analysis approach	• Retrospective assessment of PLS development/publication • Descriptive report of reasons why PLS were not included • Focus on the barriers encountered	• Descriptive report of the publisher's current position on PLS • PLS experience over the same analysis period • Focus on the barriers encountered
Analysis approach		

Panel 2: Author perspective

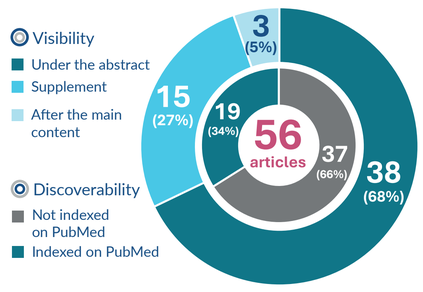
Ipsen articles subject to their pledge



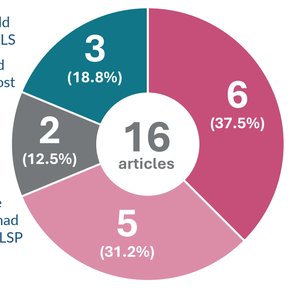
Articles published with a PLS



PLS visibility and discoverability



Reasons why PLS were not published



[a]A PLS publication (PLSP) is a standalone, peer-reviewed article that uses clear, concise, non-technical, and jargon-free language

Barriers to PLS publication

- Journals targeted for submission did not support PLS
- Journals removing PLS post acceptance and prior to publication, and lack of journal guidance
- Alignment on PLS development and submission (shortly after the pledge)

Panel 3: Publisher perspective

Preferred PLS style



Recommend text-based PLS (250 words) within the article body

PLS restrictions



PLS are **acceptable** across **most article types**

Challenges – stakeholder education

Authors → Editors

- Explain what a PLS is
- Communicate why PLS are beneficial
- Describe how to write an effective PLS
- Communicate which journals offer PLS
- Explain how PLS should be assessed
- Adapt and update the publishing process for PLS

Barriers to PLS discoverability

- PLS are not always indexed on search engines (e.g. PubMed)
- PLS within articles are difficult to search for and find on journal websites

Improving discoverability

Taylor & Francis, **Sage**, and **Becaris Publishing**, are currently working towards an **independent, cross-publisher PLS database** to help overcome these barriers

Panel 4: Looking to the future

1	How can publishers encourage more PLS submissions?	*"Raise awareness of **what PLS are** and why they are important"*	*"Raise awareness of **journals that offer PLS**"* → *"Provide online resources to help **educate authors** on how to write effective PLS"*
2	What can authors do to help get PLS published?	*"Seek out and engage with **online PLS-writing training**"*	*"Be aware of journals that offer **PLS as an option** when considering where to submit their research"* → *"Reach out to the publisher and/or journal editor with any **questions about PLS**"*
3	How do we improve PLS discoverability/visibility?	*"Check the publisher is **tagging PLS appropriately** in the metadata such that it is correctly pulled through onto PubMed for prominent visibility"*	*"Check that the publisher makes **PLS free to read** on the journal's webpage"* → *"Once available, ensure PLS are uploaded to a **central database** for ease of discoverability"*

Panel 5: Key take homes

1. Our findings provide **valuable and balanced insights** from both sides of the publication fence, with both author and publisher perspectives considered
2. Ipsen experienced **several challenges** to publishing PLS since pledging to improve their research accessibility, with journal limitations the most common reason for absent PLS
3. **Early communication** with publishers and/or **journals** may help facilitate PLS publication
4. Continued **education of stakeholders** on the benefits of PLS should encourage more submissions in the future and move towards PLS development as a standard step for all scientific literature
5. With help from publishers to foster **a uniform PLS offering** across all journals, scientific research will become more accessible to all potential readers

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Disclosures **RJ:** Employee of Taylor & Francis and may hold stock or stock options. **DG** and **JG:** Employees of Oxford PharmaGenesis. **ST:** Employee and shareholder of Ipsen.

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