

## The history of *Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica*

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### Abstract

The history of *Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica* is long, rich... and cloudy. There is no centralised archive available. However, all currently active gastroenterologists in Belgium have been trained with the journal, have published abstracts or manuscripts in it, or at least know of its existence. Whereas it started as a national society's journal in 1933, it has grown to a competitive international journal with Impact Factor. We felt the need to reconstruct the journal's long history, since this was never done before. This review tried to highlight some of the important milestones, without claiming to be complete. Looking back helps to better foresee and anticipate the future. (*Acta gastroenterol. belg.*, 2019, 82, 57-61).

### Introduction

Trying to reconstruct the history of a journal that was launched 86 years ago is difficult. The idea grew when I accepted the position of Editor-in-Chief 2 years ago, and when I realised that there is no physical editorial office with a centralised archive. Since the launch of the journal, it has been created, developed and maintained by a continuously changing editorial board of volunteers. Some of them left behind their correspondence, others did not. Based on personal communications with past Editors-in-Chief, I realised that the journal's history was rich and unique, but also cloudy. Some of the milestones were fading with the risk to be forgotten in time. Therefore, we felt the need to reconstruct the journal's long history.

The complexity of the organisation of medical care in Belgium is illustrated by two independent and different colorectal cancer screening programmes in the south and the north of the country (1,2). This duality is also reflected in the procedure to appoint the editorial positions in the board of our journal *Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica*. The journal's most recent by-laws state that the positions of Editor-in-Chief and Deputy Editor are vacant every other year. Candidates are chosen and approved by the two national gastroenterology societies: the French-speaking Société Royale Belge de Gastro-Entérologie (SRBGE) and the Dutch-speaking Vlaamse Vereniging voor Gastro-entérologie (VVGGE). Each society alternately delegates the Editor-in-Chief and *vice versa* the Deputy Editor for a 2-years term. Therefore, in contrast to the segregated situation on the level of the two national gastroenterology societies, the editorial board of *Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica* remains typically Belgian with both French- and Dutch-speaking members, as strictly stipulated in the by-laws. However, things have been different in the past...

### Le Journal Belge de Gastro-Entérologie

The 'Société Belge de Gastro-Entérologie (SBGE)' was founded in 1928 as the first national gastroenterology society in Belgium. The founder was the renown surgeon Georges Brohée (1887-1957), who was trained in Paris in digestive surgery and radiology. He actively promoted modern gastroenterology with a multidisciplinary approach, underscoring the importance of scientific reporting both on the national and the international

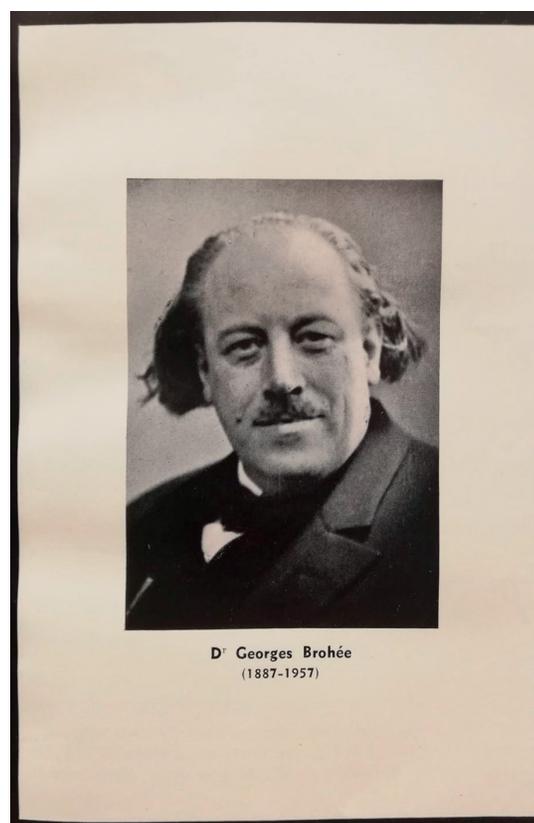


Fig. 1 — Obituary picture of Georges Brohée, published in *Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica* in 1957.

level (Figure 1) (3). He studied medicine at the Brussels University and was formed a surgeon by the World War I surgeon Antoine Depage (1862-1925) (4). He is

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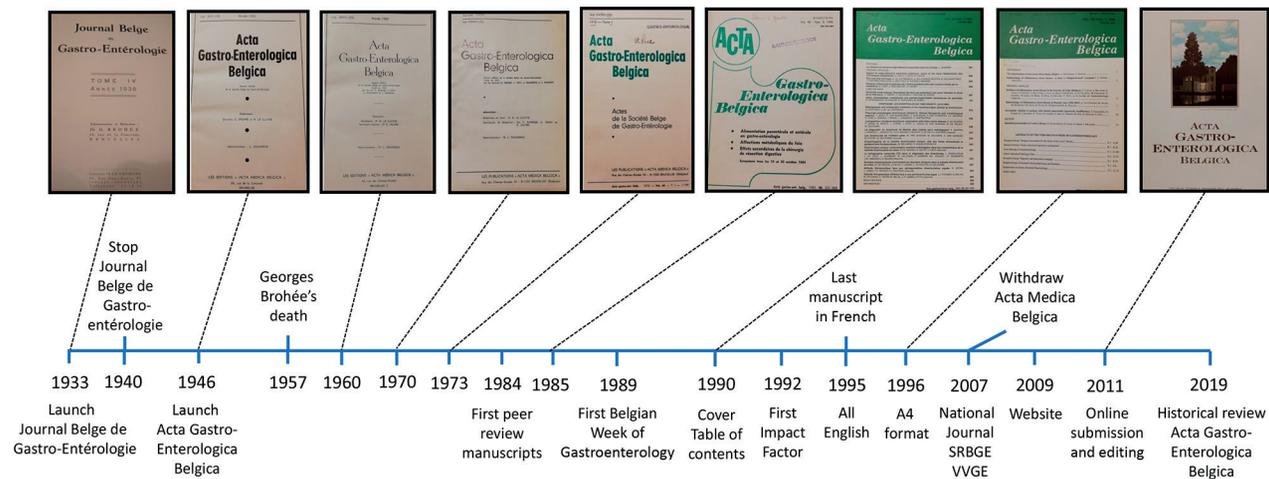


Fig. 2. — *Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica* timeline with important milestones and different covers of the journal. Note that the timetable is not linear. SRBGE: Société Royale Belge de Gastro-Entérologie, VVGE: Vlaamse Vereniging voor Gastro-enterologie.

internationally recognised a true pioneer in the field of modern gastroenterology (5). Apart from many other professional achievements, and in line with his scientific enthusiasm, he subsequently founded the first national gastroenterology journal ‘*Le Journal Belge de Gastro-Entérologie*’ together with his colleagues Joseph Massion and Léon Daumerie in 1933, Georges Brohée being the first Editor-in-Chief (Figure 2). It was the official journal of the SBGE. Manuscripts were written in French and the journal particularly served the French-speaking medical community in Belgium. For many decades French was the official language for social, cultural, political and scientific developments in Belgium. However, at the turn of the century, Flemish doctors felt the need to use their own language for professional communications, leading to the foundation in 1910 of the first Flemish medical journal ‘*Geneeskundig Tijdschrift voor België*’ (6). Within the field of gastroenterology, Georges Brohée continued to underscore the importance of scientific communication and reporting, and not only on the national level: he organised the first international gastroenterology congress in Brussels in 1935, leading to the foundation of the Société Internationale de Gastro-Entérologie (SIGE) which became the well-known World Gastroenterology Organisation (WGO) in 1958 (5,7).

### Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica

The ‘*Journal Belge de Gastro-Entérologie*’ was printed by Jean Vromans in Brussels until the beginning of World War II. The 4<sup>th</sup> and last issue of volume VIII appeared during spring 1940, and like so many others, the journal’s life came to an end because of the devastating war. However, Georges Brohée had not lost his scientific vigour and he relaunched the journal under its current name ‘*Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica*’ in January 1946 under the umbrella of *Acta Medica Belgica*, uniting and editing all national medical journals named ‘*Acta*’ in Belgium (Figure 2) (5). Georges Brohée was reinstalled

Table 1. — **Editors-in-Chief of *Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica* since its foundation in 1946**

Years	Editor-in-Chief
1946-1957	Georges BROHÉE
1957-1980	Raymond LE CLUYSE
1981-1985	André DONY
1986-1990	René FIASSE
1991-1995	André VAN GOSSUM
1996-2001	Jean HENRION
2002-2005	Olivier LE MOINE
2005-2009	Pierre DEPREZ
2009-2011	Peter MICHIELSEN
2011-2013	Peter STARKEL
2013-2015	Daniel URBAIN
2015-2017	Marianna ARVANITAKIS
2017-2019	Tom MOREELS
2019-now	Nicolas LANTHIER

as Editor-in-Chief and remained in position until his death in 1957 (Table 1). Additional administrative help from *Acta Medica Belgica* was provided by Henri Van Leemputten from 1955 onwards. Initially, the journal published the clinical communications of the monthly SBGE meetings and symposia, and bibliographic comments. All manuscripts were written in French, with summaries in Dutch and English, and sometimes also in German or Spanish. However, as from 1948 onwards, more manuscripts written in English were published in the journal. Little by little, English manuscripts became more frequent and the last manuscript written in French was published in 1995. It was under the editorial leadership of André Van Gossium that the official language of *Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica* became English, in order to attract more international authors and to reach an international audience (8). This decision together with the high quality of the published manuscripts led to

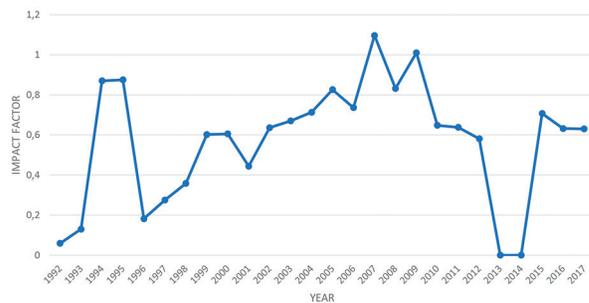


Fig. 3. — Historical evolution of the *Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica* Impact Factor.

an important scientific recognition by the journal's first Impact Factor obtained in 1992 (Figure 3). The Impact Factor, developed in 1975 by Eugene Garfield (1925-2017) in search of a correct and competitive ranking of medical journals, is the ratio of cited manuscripts to the total number of published manuscripts (of the last 2 years), and it is still considered as one of the most important bibliometric metrics today (9).

In the meantime, the SBGE became the society for the French-speaking community, and in 1982, the organisation's by-laws were revised and it was renamed Société Royale Belge de Gastro-Entérologie (SRBGE) (10). The reason for this linguistic separation was the foundation of the VVGE by the Flemish gastroenterologists in 1954. The VVGE also launched a new journal '*Tijdschrift voor Gastro-enterologie*', with scientific papers written in Dutch or in English. Although the journal was PubMed-indexed until 1978, it lacked an Impact Factor and thus international recognition, and it finally expired in 2006. And so, from 2007 onwards, *Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica* was considered as the Belgian national journal for gastroenterology and hepatology, empowered by both scientific societies SRBGE and VVGE.

During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, multiple gastroenterology- and hepatology-related societies were founded, dealing with endoscopy, hepatology, oncology, ... each organizing its own scientific meeting. In order to strengthen the impact and to reduce the multitude of meetings to an acceptable number, René Fiasse organized the first national Joint Meeting of Gastroenterology in 1987 (7). The selection of presentations was done anonymously and based on the abstract quality, as put forward by Jan De Groot (1925-2018) from the VVGE. Two years later, the Joint Meeting of Gastroenterology became the *Belgian Week of Gastroenterology*, as we know it today (7). All accepted abstracts of the *Belgian Week of Gastroenterology* are published in the first issue of each volume of *Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica* since then and can officially be referred to in scientific publications. The history and evolution of this national annual joint meeting has been described previously in our journal by its founder (7).

The position of the Editor-in-Chief was not always

limited to a 2-years term, as it is currently the case. Georges Brohée was Editor-in-Chief from the relaunch of the journal in 1946 until his death in 1957. His successor Raymond Le Cluyse kept the position for over 20 years from 1957 until 1980. According to the revised SRBGE by-laws in 1982, the terms of the journal's editorial positions were reduced to 5 years. In 2009, the administrators of the journal together with the SRBGE, VVGE and the *Belgian Week of Gastroenterology* officialised their scientific collaboration with the construction of a non-profit association for the journal and the editorial terms were further reduced to 2 years. This 2-year editorial interplay between VVGE and SRBGE was adopted and consolidated in the new by-laws. Peter Michiels (VVGE) became the first Flemish Editor-in-Chief from 2009 to 2011. Marianna Arvanitakis was the first (and until now the only) female Editor-in-Chief from 2015 to 2017. The structure of the journal's editorial board was also defined in the new by-laws. The associate editors were to be assigned by the following supporting scientific organisations: steering societies SRBGE and VVGE, *Belgian Association for the Study of the Liver* (BASL), *Belgian Society of Gastrointestinal Endoscopy* (BSGIE), *Belgian Group of Digestive Oncology* (BGDO), *Belgian Gastrointestinal Pathology Club*, *Belgian Society of Pediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition* (BeSPGHAN), *Belgian Helicobacter Pylori Contact Group* (BHPCG), *Belgian IBD Research and Development Group* (BIRD) and *Vlaamse Vereniging voor Klinische Voeding en Metabolisme* (VVKVM). And although the position of treasurer was to be assigned every 4 years by either the SRBGE or the VVGE, Paul Hoste became the journal's treasurer, and proved to be loyal to the journal for many years. He introduced professional accounting which greatly improved the journal's financial situation. Since his retirement in 2017, he helped his successor Maridi Aerts to find her way in the financial management of the journal. Current funding of *Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica* relies on annual donations by the steering and supporting scientific societies, annual subscriptions and income from published publicity sold to pharmaceutical companies. Initially, most of the funding came from donations from the scientific societies. As from the 1980s onwards, pharmaceutical publicity was published sporadically in the journal. And over the years, the importance of publicity funding increased, allowing the gradual decrease of the donations from the scientific societies. Different strategies with contractual partners have been tried to sell publicity with mixed success, always guarding the balance between the important scientific content of the journal and the necessary publicity.

Apart from a Belgian national journal, *Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica* has grown into a competitive international medical journal with international authors and readers. As shown in Figure 4, the number of submitted original manuscripts is annually increasing, and thanks to a stringent peer review process, this results in an

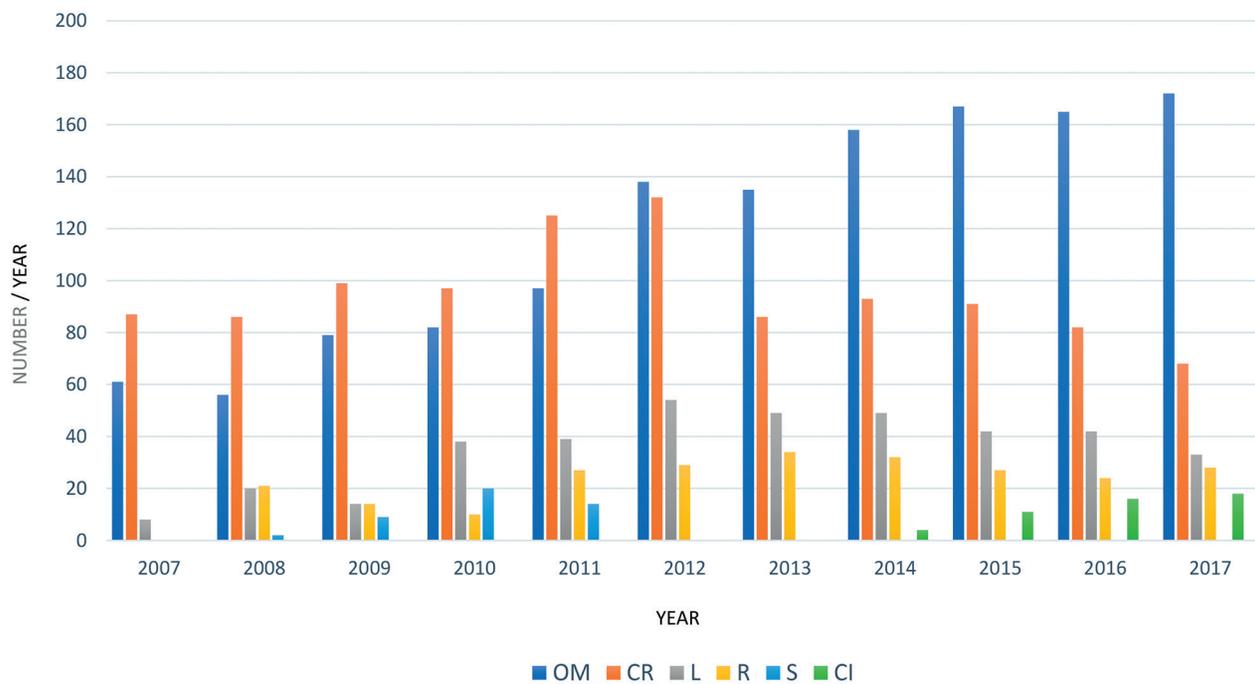


Fig. 4. — Evolution of the number and nature of submitted manuscripts to *Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica* over a decade (2007-2017). OM: original manuscripts, CR: case reports, L: letters, R: reviews, S: symposium articles, CI: clinical images.

acceptance rate of 8.7% (in 2017). Submitted manuscripts in 2017 originated from 40 different countries worldwide. The internationalisation of the journal required new quality standards to provide the necessary services to authors and readers. The anonymous peer review process was initiated in 1984 under the editorship of André Dony and the ever-growing possibilities of the world wide web were considered useful for the journal by Editor-in-Chief Olivier Le Moine. Despite the administrative help from Christel and Steve Martin from Scribis, located in Brussels at that time, the editorial board was struggling with the increasing amount of submitted manuscripts under the form of hard copies sent by ordinary mail. Therefore, under the editorship of Pierre Deprez, the SRBGE and *Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica* withdrew from under the umbrella of *Acta Medica Belgica* in 2007 in order to speed up the informatisation and digitalisation process of the journal. The new secretary Mia Persoons gradually took over the administrative function from Scribis as from November 2008 onwards. *Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica* had grown to independence, ready to face the challenges of the quickly evolving digital revolution with an official website ([www.acta-gastroenterologica.be](http://www.acta-gastroenterologica.be)). The printing of the journal was provided by publisher Universa Press in Wetteren, who launched the currently used online submission and editing platform on March 1, 2011 under the editorship of Peter Stärkel. However, digital problems are not always easily foreseen nor solved. As shown in Figure 3, the journal's Impact Factor is missing for the years 2013 and 2014. This was due to a temporary loss of access to our website from Thompson Reuters, and the consequent

inability to index the manuscripts published in *Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica*. The problem lasted 2 years before it was finally solved... Swift and correct indexing of the journal's manuscripts is of the utmost importance to gain good visibility and to maintain the Impact Factor. Therefore, the process of indexing is now back in the hands of the journal's editorial office and manuscripts are indexed immediately at the time of publication.

Since the launch of the journal as '*Journal Belge de Gastro-Entérologie*' in 1933 and the relaunch as '*Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica*' in 1946, the concept of diffusing scientific knowledge in the field of gastroenterology and hepatology has been well preserved for 86 years. However, the outlook of the journal has evolved progressively from a small A5 format to the more practical A4 format in 1996 (Figure 2) (8). The initial cover only mentioned the journal's name, volume and issue number, whereas from 1990 onwards, the table of contents was also shown on the cover, in line with renown international journals like the *New England Journal of Medicine* and *Gut* (11). In 2011, the current cover was chosen by the board showing a picture of the painting "L'empire des lumières" from the famous Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte (1898-1967), to underscore the Belgian origin of this international journal. And so, the table of contents moved back to the first pages of each issue, as it was in the beginning. *Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica* is not static, nor dead. The journal has constantly been on the move. Slowly breathing, continuously growing, it is taken care of like a little baby by each individual Editor-in-Chief during its long history, as a tribute to its founder Georges Brohé.

## Conclusions

The journal you are holding now has changed a lot since the first issue of the '*Journal Belge de Gastro-Entérologie*' was released in 1933, and yet it has well preserved the spirit of its founder Georges Brohée. *Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica* aims to provide high quality manuscripts on clinical gastroenterology and hepatology by (inter)national authors for an (inter)national audience. The journal keeps up with new digital opportunities in order to diffuse up-to-date manuscripts on rapidly evolving medical sciences. All this would not be possible without the tireless and voluntary help of the journal's editorial team. We felt the need to reconstruct the journal's long and rich history, since this was never done before. This review tried to highlight some of the important milestones, without the claim of being complete. Many information was extracted from editorials published in the journal over the years, scattered archives of editorial correspondence and personal communications with past Editors-in-Chief. Looking back is as enlightening as looking forward. What the future of *Acta Gastro-Enterologica Belgica* brings can be read in this issue's Editorial (12).

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