The American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine focuses on human biology and disease, as well as animal studies that contribute to the understanding of pathophysiology and treatment of diseases that affect the respiratory system and critically ill patients. Papers that are solely or predominantly based in cell and molecular biology are published in the companion journal, the American Journal of Respiratory Cell and Molecular Biology. The Journal also seeks to publish outstanding review articles on areas of interest in several forms. The State-of-the-Art review is a treatise usually covering a broad field that brings bench research to the bedside. Shorter reviews are published as Critical Care Perspectives or Pulmonary Perspectives. These are generally focused on a more limited area and advance a concerted opinion about care for a specific process. Concise Clinical Reviews provide an evidence-based synthesis of the literature pertaining to topics of fundamental importance to the practice of pulmonary, critical care, and sleep medicine. Images providing advances or unusual contributions to the field are published as Images in Pulmonary, Critical Care, Sleep Medicine and the Sciences.

A recent trend and future direction of the Journal has been to include debates of a topical nature on issues of importance in pulmonary and critical care medicine and to the membership of the American Thoracic Society. Other recent changes have included encompassing works from the field of critical care medicine and the extension of the editorial governing of journal policy to colleagues outside of the United States of America. The focus and direction of the Journal is to establish an international forum for state-of-the-art respiratory and critical care medicine.

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