

PUBLICATION AUDIT AND THE IMPORTANCE OF ONLINE MEDICAL JOURNALS

Shaukat Ali Jawaid & Masood Jawaid

A detailed self-analysis for the Year 2004 shows that satisfactory progress has been made and Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences is now much better recognized internationally. It is evident from the fact that ever since the start of the online edition (www.pjms.com.pk) there has been a steady increase in the manuscripts being received and published from overseas.

During 2004 a total of 140 new manuscripts were received which included 62 from overseas as compared to 37 in 2003. (Table-I & II) This shows almost over 90% increase. Similarly a total of 91 original articles, reviews, case reports and special communications were published during 2004 of which thirty six were from overseas which is almost 40% of the total manuscripts accommodated during this period.(Table-III)

We started experimenting with open peer review and found it quite satisfactory. Of the original articles, 33 were accepted without any revision while another 23 were accommodated after they were revised and resubmitted by the authors after peer review. (Table-IV)

While rejoicing on some of our achievements, we are mindful of our failures as well. Though the journal is being covered and indexed by a large number of databases, indexing services including Excerpta Medica from Netherlands, WHO Index Medicus ExtraMed, PakMedinet, CAB Abstracts and Global Health UK, it is not yet covered by Medline and we are hopeful of a positive decision soon. Financially the journal remains in loss and continue to be

heavily subsidized by our sister publication Pulse International. But it is also a fact that most of the medical journals published from the developing Third World countries including EMRO Region are facing financial crisis and this issue has been repeatedly highlighted at the WHO Regional Conferences on Medical Journals held at Cairo and Riyadh during 2003 and 2004.^(1,2) No progress could be made as regards publication of supplements as planned while a few members of the Editorial Board still need to be convinced of their personal contributions and more input in improving the quality and standard of the journal.

Increase in the number of papers being received for publication has provided us an opportunity to be choosy and selective as regards accepting the papers for publication. This will have a positive impact and further improve the quality and standard of journal. In order to reduce the waiting period, the volume has been increased to accommodate more manuscripts despite financial constraints. Even after revision, a total of 21 manuscripts were rejected while five papers were withdrawn by the authors during the same period. One of the authors withdrew the paper after it had gone through the peer review and acceptance letter was issued saying that one of the co-authors has sent it to a journal indexed in Medline. Four authors decided to withdraw their papers after these were peer reviewed, revised based on the reviewers comments, suggestions and accepted since they wanted early publication and we could not oblige them. The authors must understand that the whole peer review system is time consuming and they have to be patient and wait for publication? Those who indulge in simultaneous submission to more

Correspondence

Shaukat Ali Jawaid
e-mail: shaukat@pulsepakistan.com

than one journal usually do so to reduce the time to publication. But they do not realize that in this way they waste the precious time of the reviewer's and editors. This also increases the chances of duplicate publication thereby distorting the scientific record, since there is poor communication between the editors.

The reviewers are "unpaid experts" of varying quality. The whole peer review system

may be frustrating and stressful not only for the authors but also the editors most of whom are stretched for time. But it is also a fact that there is no alternative yet available to check that bad science, biased science and substandard research does not get published. However there is no guarantee that Peer Review and other ethical means will eliminate the publication of below standard as well as

Table-I: Total manuscripts received during 2004

PAKISTAN		78
Islamabad	08	
Punjab	30	
Sindh	27	
NWFP	13	
Balochistan	-	
OVERSEAS		62
TOTAL		140

Table-II: Details of overseas manuscript received during 2003 & 2004

	2003	2004
Bangladesh	02	04
Canada	-	01
India	-	02
Iran	13	21
Ireland	-	01
Jordan	04	04
Kuwait	-	01
Lebanon	-	01
Nepal	01	01
Nigeria	01	02
Palestine	-	02
Poland	01	01
Saudi Arabia	07	09
Thailand	-	01
Tunisia	01	02
Turkey	06	05
UAE	01	01
UK	-	01
USA	-	02
TOTAL	37	62

Table-III: Total manuscripts published during 2004

Publisher's Note	01
Editorial	04
Current Practice	01
Leading Article	01
Original Article	56
Review Article	05
Case Report	11
Special Communication	02
Short Communication	01
Continuing Medical Education (CME)	01
Conference Proceedings	01
Common Surgical Procedures	01
Correspondence	04
Book Review	01
Subject & Authors Index	01
Published manuscripts from Pakistan	55
Published manuscripts from Overseas	36
TOTAL	91

Table-IV: Acceptance status of the published manuscript – 2004

	Primary Acceptance	Revision Accepted
Editorial	04	-
Current Practice	01	-
Leading Articles	01	-
Original Articles	33	23
Review Articles	04	01
Case Report	06	05
Special Communication	01	01
Short Communication	-	01
Continuing Medical Education	-	01
Conference Proceedings	01	-

ghost written papers.

A vast majority of the papers by Pakistani authors are mostly written to get promotions in their academic career. That is why at times, the hastily conducted research is not of good quality. However, the quality of manuscripts published in the medical journals in the developed world also remains under discussion. Barraclough believes that most of the scientific papers are written not to be read but to be published, as the authors are eager to see their names in print. More papers mean more addition to their CV and it is also helpful in securing further financial assistance or grants for research or promotion in job.⁽³⁾ Even Richard Smith former Editor of BMJ feels that only "5% of published papers reached minimum standards of scientific soundness and clinical relevance and in most journals the figure was less than 1%.⁽⁴⁾ Editor of Nature believes that scientific papers serve the needs of their authors above those of their readers.⁽⁵⁾

Indexing in Medline is considered quite prestigious and an established yardstick to determine the standard and quality of a journal. However, indexing in Medline may not be so simple as it looks. This issue has been discussed in detail at WHO EMRO Regional conferences on Medical Journals.^(1,2) At present most of the medical journals published from the developing Third world countries are indexed in WHO Index Medicus. According to Dr. Najeeb Al-Shorbaji from WHO EMRO, a portal for regional Online Medical Journals will be established. Efforts are also underway to make arrangements with National Library of Medicine to use same software platform which will enable searching Medline and EMR Index Medicus at the same time.⁽⁶⁾ Once this is accomplished, it will enable the researchers an easy access to the medical literature from the developing Third world countries as well and it will also improve their citation in world medical literature.

However, there is another school of thought that includes distinguished researchers and writers like Prof. Ronald E. LaPorte Professor of Epidemiology at University of Pittsburgh,

USA. They feel that with the availability of full text Online medical journals indexing in Medline is going to become irrelevant.⁽⁷⁾ In future the issue won't be of Medline Indexed or non-Indexed medical journals but frequency of their citations. It is now readily available on Goggles Scholar which has revolutionized the whole concept and it will get rid of the problem of indexation. They do not believe in existing peer review and quality control system. Their argument is that new approaches for quality control like statistical quality control procedures are needed. Prof. LaPorte feels that instead of pre-review to exclude articles, we should give importance to post review comments on the article once they are published. As such it is advisable for the medical journals not yet covered by Medline to increase their visibility by having online editions with full text manuscripts allowing free access to the global readership. This will tremendously increase their readership and citation rate. A number of medical journals are already included in Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). Our personal experience with the Online Edition (pjms.com.pk) has been quite rewarding. During February 2005 our journal website (www.pjms.com.pk) received a total of 90,330 hits and the number of pages viewed was 18,771.

The importance of Peer Review system cannot be ignored. In a country like Pakistan, we still have a long way to go and at present there appears to be no effective viable system to ensure quality of the manuscripts accepted for publication but through the peer review system.

Yet another problem that Editors in the developing, Third World countries face is the poor quality of English language in the manuscripts. This is because half of the world's scientists write in a language which is not their own. At times some of these manuscripts may contain a useful message for the clinicians but it is very poorly conveyed. These write-ups need almost re-writing and Editors do not have so much time at their disposal. They may not have the resources either to acquire the services of staff

to re-write these manuscripts. Hence what happens is that sometime such manuscripts are rejected and returned to the authors for re-writing. If the Editors wish to help such authors, their re-writing by the Editorial team may take much more time thereby resulting in delay in publication.

Our experience shows that majority of the Pakistani scientists, healthcare professionals need to be trained in the art, rules and regulations of scientific writing. College of Physicians and Surgeons of Pakistan (CPSP) and Aga Khan University (AKU) are doing a commendable job by holding regular workshops on Biostatistics and research methodology for postgraduates. AKU also runs short courses on biostatistics on regular basis. Pakistan Medical Journalists Association (PMJA) is also holding seminars and workshops on Medical Writing and Peer Review System for the last many years in different institutions all over the country. But this is not enough. It is important that all medical institutions have a functioning Medical Education Department which should be holding such seminars, workshops regularly. A few lectures on medical writing and research methodology at the undergraduate level will also help create interest in the subject among the medical students.

One of the major deficiencies found in the manuscripts is of inadequate statistical analysis of the data. Neither the medical journals have so much resources nor most of the writers are trained in biostatistics. As such it is extremely important that authorities appoint statisticians in all the medical institutions. Their presence will be a great help to the medical writers and researchers who can seek their

advice and assistance while planning research studies and writing manuscripts.

In order to improve the standard and quality of manuscripts as well as of medical journals, there is a need to have regional training courses not only for the writers and reviewers but also for the Editors of the regional medical journals. The recently formed Eastern Mediterranean Association of Medical Editors (EMAME) it is hoped will play a vital role in this regard.⁽⁸⁾ It is also heartening to note that there is a desire for more active collaboration in this field between the Editors of Pakistan and Iran and possibilities of having some joint training workshops is being discussed. If both these brotherly countries can make some progress in this regard, it will be a great breakthrough.

REFERENCES

1. Jawaid SA. Proceedings of the First Regional Conference on Medical Journals organized by WHO EMRO held at Cairo. *Pak J Med Sci* 2003;19(4)330-43.
2. Jawaid SA. Proceedings of the Second Regional Conference on Medical Journals held at Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. *Pak J Med Sci* 2004;20(4)403-14.
3. Barraclough K. Why doctors don't read research papers. *BMJ* 2004; 329:1411.
4. Smith R. Royal College of Psychiatrists conference. Reported by Basely S. *Guardian* 1998 June 24.
5. Maddox J. Quoted in: Not our style. *Communicating science; a handbook*. London; Longman 1991; 51.
6. Najeeb Al-Shorbaji. Portal for Regional Online Medical Journals to be established. Interview, *Pulse International*, November 15th, 2004; 5(23):1.
7. LaPorte RE. With availability of full text Online Medical Journals indexing in Medline is going to become irrelevant. (Interview) *Pulse International*, February 15th, 2005; 6(4):1.
8. Jawaid SA. Birth of Eastern Mediterranean Association of Medical Editors (EMAME). *Pak J Med Sci* 2004;20(4):279-82.