

*Editorial*

## CRITERIA FOR DETERMINATION OF CREDIT FOR PUBLICATION OF RESEARCH AND THE NEED TO ENCOURAGE WRITERS

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The art of medical writing is not fully developed in Pakistan. Though we have a large number of distinguished physicians and surgeons in different disciplines of medicine but except a few, they have not made much contribution to the medical literature. Very few Pakistani healthcare professionals have authored books, though the trend is now changing for the better.

In the past neither many doctors in general and faculty members in particular were interested nor there was any compulsion for them to write and publish. However ever since the Pakistan Medical & Dental Council, Federal and Provincial Public Service Commissions made it mandatory for the selection and promotion of faculty members to have a requisite number of papers published in medical and dental journals recognized by the PM&DC, the medical and dental teachers as well as post-graduates have been forced to write. That is why many a times the quality of such manuscripts written under compulsion is not so good. The PM&DC has also laid down the criteria for determination of credit for publication of research, which has been revised many times. Its most recent notification dated June 25<sup>th</sup> 2003 has laid down the following criteria:<sup>1</sup>

- First three authors of an original research nominated by the principle author and notified to the Editor before publication will get equal credit i.e. ten marks.

- Dissertation and Thesis will be given credit of full-published paper.
- Letters to the Editor, Case Report, Review article, Chapter in the book, Text Book etc. will carry no credit.
- Evidence based Clinical or Therapeutic Series consisting of minimum of ten cases will be given credit of full paper.
- Articles written by husband and wife working in the same discipline are acceptable but the editors of peer review journals should look into the work and nature of their contribution in research.
- Letter of Acceptance for publication of a research paper will no longer qualify the applicant for award of credit of a research paper.

The above credit criteria need to be revised to encourage new writers. Case reports are considered an excellent form of medical writing for the beginners under the supervision of a teacher or supervisor. This does not need much hard work like an original articles, needs only a few references and generally not much study is required. A case report could consist of a single case or a few cases. In the life of a doctor there comes many interesting cases which are rare, behave differently, confuse them and pose diagnostic dilemma. Solving those problems enriches the experience of doctors.<sup>2</sup> Documenting such cases warns others to be suspicious particularly so in case of adverse effects of drugs. Their timely publication could alert others hence save many precious lives.

We in "Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences"

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(SPECIALIST) were the first to report adverse effects with overdose of Halofantrine. This paper by Bukhari SNH<sup>3</sup> reported the case of a young man who developed ventricular fibrillation and generalized convulsive seizure with antimalarials Halofantrine after administration at usually "recommended dose". ECG showed prolonged QT interval with multifocal ventricular ectopic beats, which reverted spontaneously. The author had recommended that Halofantrine should be prescribed in the dose of 25mg/Kg body weight instead of recommended adult dosage which may result in overdose. Although this was not accepted by the company but the author insisted on his observations and felt that "such an expensive drug still needs to be maintained under surveillance with an adequate monitoring of possible side effects".<sup>4</sup> This alerted many others with the result that soon there was another report from Tasleem and Imran Khan from Peshawar entitled "Sudden death while on Halofantrine treatment".<sup>5</sup> Similar findings and observations were later reported by Nosten F et al, Castot A et al and Monlun et al in 1993<sup>6,7,8</sup> in Lancet which forced the company to issue necessary clarifications and make necessary changes in the product information. This fully highlights the importance of case reports. There are many such instances wherein products marketed after clinical trials had to be withdrawn from the market because of serious adverse effects.

The importance of case reports should not be undermined due to the fact that they are usually published in the end by most of the journals. Some senior medical writers have reported that two case reports should get a credit equal to an original paper.<sup>2</sup> More recently the speakers at the Workshop on Manuscript Writing held at Aga Khan University on September 1-2, 2003 had also highlighted the importance of writing case reports for the beginners.<sup>9</sup>

Earlier the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council had decided that case reports will get one third credit (three marks as against ten for an original paper)<sup>10</sup> One does not know the

reasons which forced the PM&DC to change this credit criteria which will definitely discourage the new writers. Such decisions by the PM&DC only shows that those entrusted with the responsibility to look into such matters are not fully conversant with the art of medical writing and publication of research. Even in the past the PM&DC is alleged to have taken certain decisions at the whims and fancies of certain individuals. Those who have never written any Updates, Clinical Reviews or authored books cannot be expected to realize their importance. Such decisions in return have seriously eroded the intellectual integrity of those at the helm of affairs in the PM&DC. As a matter of fact such decisions must be based on sound principles and convincing arguments with the main objective of promoting publication of research.

In order to encourage the beginners to start writing, Letters to the Editor are considered the first best option followed by Case Reports. Once these people develop a habit of writing and know how to write and do literature search, they will get interested in original research work as well. Hence it is important that properly referenced "Letters to the Editor" and "Case Reports" as well as Good Clinical Reviews and Books must get some credit for the writers and authors. Three case reports can be considered equal to an original paper since the idea behind such rules is to encourage and promote the culture of documentation and publication of research and not to discourage people from sharing their knowledge and experience. Similarly writing a Review article is considered a punishment for an author who is supposed to do a lot of literature search. Even otherwise, these Reviews are extremely useful for CME of the practicing physicians. Writing a Book or a Monograph is not an easy task either and only those who have accomplished this know how difficult it is to do literature search to find relevant references of related studies apart from the time and money involved. Such decisions by the academic bodies like the PM&DC will only discourage those juniors faculty members and postgraduates

who in the early stages of their professional career when they have enthusiasm as well as time, to accomplish such things. Such unfortunate decisions by the PM&DC further strengthens the need to reconstitute this body benefiting from the wisdom of those who are actively involved in such academic activities rather than being left at the mercy of medical bureaucrats which the PM&DC is trying to do. There are a few medical and dental journals, which are peer reviewed which are published regularly. They have a long waiting list for publication of manuscripts once it is approved passing through the Peer Review System. The "Letter of Acceptance for Publication" issued by those medical and dental journals whose professional integrity is unquestionable and those who fully follow the guidelines by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) should be given due importance. It is foolish and unwise to punish all the journals for the folly of those journals, which indulge in unethical publication practices. Membership of the PM&DC comprise of many distinguished members of the medical profession who must look into these issues with an open mind and ensure that their decisions are based on some sound principles with the sole objective of encouraging medical writing and publication of research. There is no denying the fact that the list of recognized medical and dental journals also needs to be constantly reviewed so that their quality and standard is maintained and improved further.

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