

IMPROVING STANDARD OF MEDICAL JOURNALISM IN PAKISTAN: A welcome initiative by the PM&DC

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Pakistan Medical & Dental Council organized an interactive session with some editors of medical and dental journals at Islamabad on December 6th 2003. Over a dozen editors of various journals attended it while Prof. M. Owais who is a member of the Journals Committee and Secretary of the PM&DC Dr. Sohail Karim Hashami represented the PM&DC. Although no formal agenda was sent to the participants before the meeting except a booklet compiled by the council "Essential Guidelines for Authors, Reviewers and Editors of Medical and Dental Journals"¹ but during the deliberations it was stated that the council wishes to improve the standard of medical journalism in Pakistan. It was further pointed out that the council would like to act as a facilitator rather than sticking to its regulatory role which is indeed a welcome initiative. It was also pointed out that through such dialogue and discussions, an opportunity was being provided to the Editors to participate in the decision-making as regards recognition of medical and dental journals.

New guidelines for recognition of journals

The new guidelines for recognition of medical and dental journals were also discussed in detail. For recognition it will be necessary that the journals are published at least biannually and they will be bound to publish as per frequency declared in the declaration Form. Any journal, which starts combining its issues or allows long gaps between the issues for whatever reasons would be suspended from

the list of approved journals. Other guidelines include that the Chief Editor and Members of the Editorial Board must be men of integrity and their resume with special reference to publications will have to be submitted at the time of application. Any change in Editor, Editorial Board of the journal will have to be communicated to the PM&DC.

Each article accepted for publication must be peer reviewed at least by two persons and regular publication of subject and author index will be mandatory. The PM&DC committee will review the Journal's recognition after every three years to evaluate the performance of the journal for its renewal to be on the list of PM&DC. After discussion it was also decided that two representatives of the Editors will be named to this committee and this proposal will be sent to the PM&DC executive for final approval. A proposal to form a National Committee of Medical Editors was also floated during the deliberations.

Credit Criteria

The credit for publication of research papers also came under discussion. However for reasons best known to the PM&DC Journals Committee, they decided to stick to the criteria which neither encourages the new writers nor does justice in many cases. As per the criteria approved by the PM&DC first three authors will get equal credit i.e. ten marks out of ten while the remaining authors will get the proportionate credit as one fourth for the fourth author and one fifth for the fifth author and so on. In its wisdom the committee feels that Letters to the Editor and Case Reports should

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not be eligible for any credit. However manuscript containing minimum of ten cases management should be given a new name i.e. "Evidence Based Clinical or Therapeutic Series" and it will be given credit of full paper. Review article/Chapter in the textbook or books etc., were not considered worthy of any credit but Dissertation/Thesis will be given credit of full-published paper. Husband and wife if both are authors in a manuscript will be acceptable even if they are working in the same department. However the peer reviewers must look into the work and nature of their contribution. Letter of Acceptance for publication of a research paper will no longer qualify the applicant for award of credit of a research paper.

Some of the above decisions are questionable. Since most of the members of the Journals Committee of PM&DC are not personally actively involved in editing and publication of journals, they are not aware of the ground realities, which are quite different than their perceptions. If we wish to encourage new writers, it is important that Letters to the Editor, which contain some clinical material and experience of the writer while commenting on the published manuscripts, must get some credit. Similarly the concept that Review Articles, Chapters in Text Books are supposed to come from Experts who do not require any credit is also not based on facts most of the time. As highlighted by speakers from Iran, Egypt, Iraq and many others during the First WHO Regional Conference on Medical Journals at Cairo recently, people mostly write for getting promotions and once they become Professors, they no longer feel the need to write. Similarly it was also stated that young faculty members are the most efficient reviewers.^{2,3} Hence it is these individuals most of whom belong to the young faculty who are more active in academics. Writing a review article involves lot of literature search and there is so much material available on the Internet that any competent, intelligent healthcare professional is capable of accomplishing this task. Hence there seems to be no justification in depriving them of any credit. However in order to ensure indulgence

in original research work for promotion, credit from Case Reports, Letters, Review Articles etc, should not be more than 25% of the required credit. For example if it is essential to have hundred marks for getting promotion, 25 marks can be obtained from the later while the remaining 75 marks must be earned from original research work. Previously authors of the letters, case reports and review articles did get some credit as pointed out earlier^{4,5} but one fails to understand why this criteria was changed though there is no harm in incorporating some modification and alterations based on these lines.

Similarly although there are over two dozen medical and dental journals recognized by the PM&DC but the fact remains that only a few of them are being published regularly for various reasons. Hence the waiting period for the authors who wish to get their manuscripts published in standard good quality peer reviewed journals is already very long. There is no justification to deprive these authors of credit for promotion. Once they present a Letter of Acceptance of their manuscript for publication, they should be entitled to get full credit. Failure to do so will not only hurt the authors but will also put more pressure on editors and journals for early publication.

This meeting which was held for the first time to discuss these issues also provided an opportunity to listen to the problems faced by the Editors of Medical Journals and see if the PM&DC could do something to resolve them. While reviewing the guidelines on Uniform Requirements for manuscript submitted to biomedical journals by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, the PM&DC representatives were told that these have since been revised and updated in November 2003.⁶ The Editors were asked to follow these guidelines while reviewing and accepting the manuscripts for publication.

It was also emphasized that the Editor does not mean a mere handler of manuscripts but he/she must be able to re-write the manuscripts when needed. They must be fully aware of the duties, responsibilities of the Editors as

per the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) guidelines.⁷ The participants were also informed of the latest developments in this regard i.e. the formation of Forum of African Medical Editors (FAME)⁸ and the proposed formation of Eastern Mediterranean Association of Medical Editors (EMAME) as per decisions taken during the First WHO Regional meeting on Medical Journals publishing held at Cairo Egypt during October 2003.⁹

It was strange to listen to some of the participants who came up with certain ridiculous demands i.e. requesting the council to arrange for some funding, asking it to get the papers reviewed on behalf of the journals and arranging distribution of the journals since it is very expensive. The editors must realize that editing a journal can no longer be a part time job. It is a very stressful job, which demands lot of time and financial resources.¹⁰ Hence to begin with some minimum full time editorial staff is essential. Secondly they have to generate their own resources rather than asking the Council to arrange for some funding and lastly if they cannot set up a good effective and functional peer review system, why are they interested to continue publication of such journals? Some of the editors also complained that they do not get enough manuscripts to publish the journal regularly. Again it depends on the journal itself, In view of the fast changing world and numerous developments taking place, thanks to the revolution in information technology, they have to make their publications visible. Apart from ensuring regular publication and maintaining an effective distribution system, they must have their own websites giving detailed information about their publications. Not only that now more and more journals are having their online editions as well. Though it is very expensive and may not be easily feasible and practical for many journals most of which are already facing financial crisis but the fact remains that this is the way to go if one has to survive. During the WHO regional conference on medical journals publishing at Cairo most of the speakers from the EMRO countries had expressed the similar feelings that

because of financial constraints, publication of the journals was not financially viable. However, it is up to the editors to find a solution to these problems. Those journals, which have increased visibility through various means including the creation of online editions, do not face any paucity of good manuscripts. Ever since we launched our Online edition of Pak J Med Sci, (www.pjms.com.pk) there has been 100% increase in the manuscripts being received from overseas and more and more such good quality manuscripts are being accommodated after passing through the peer review system.¹¹ In view of the increased number of manuscripts being received and ever increasing waiting time for publication, we are now seriously thinking to increase the frequency of Pak J Med Sci from quarterly to bimonthly in the near future.

Though this meeting between the editors and PM&DC cannot be termed as highly productive as no concrete decisions were taken to either improve the standard of medical journalism or resolve the problems faced by Editors of journals but one hopes that further discussions might lead to certain healthy developments. There is a need for the training of reviewers as well as Editors. Pakistan Medical Journalists Association (PMJA) had taken the initiative and it did organize numerous seminars, symposia and discussions on medical writing besides organizing the Workshops on Peer Review System at Karachi and Lahore, which was first such activity ever, held in Pakistan.¹² CPSP is continuously organizing workshops on Medical Writing Biostatistics and Research Methodology for postgraduates though they charge too much. The need for the training of editors was felt and highlighted during the WHO Conference on Medical Journals publishing and one of the aims and objectives of the proposed EMAME is to organize such workshops in the region. A conference on Medical Writing, Editing, Reviewing and Journal publishing, electronic publishing, open access and publication ethics is being held at Bombay in India from September 23-26th 2004 sponsored by Journal of Postgraduate Medicine, Bombay

India and a similar meeting is being organized by Dr. Ahmad Jamal in Bahrain during March 2004 with the help of consultants from WHO EMRO. We may witness more and more such activities in the region in the days to come as its need is now being felt more seriously by all those concerned.

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