Editorial

A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT TO PROMOTE MEDICAL JOURNALISM IN PAKISTAN

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It was no less than a miracle that the initiative taken by Pakistan Medical Journalists Association and Army Medical College to organize first ever National Conference on Medical Editing at Rawalpindi proved a great success. It had the blessings and support of National University of Science and Technology and the Higher Education Commission. The conference attracted over one hundred twenty participants who benefited from the knowledge and experience of local faculty consisting of many distinguished medical editors as well as invited guest faculty from WHO EMRO, Islamic Republic of Iran, UAE and Saudi Arabia. Thus it gave a practical shape to regional co-operation to promote the cause of medical journalism as envisaged by the Eastern Mediterranean Association of Medical Editors (EMAME) which was formed at Cairo meeting in 2004.[1]

Many important issues which included medical editing process in different countries, peer review process, problems faced by editors of peer reviewed journals, publication ethics, menace of duplicate publications, plagiarism, publication misconduct, Indexation, relevance and importance of Impact Factor, E publishing and training of Editors were discussed in detail. Detailed proceedings of the conference have been included in this issue. The conference came up with a set of recommendations which have been forwarded to various government agencies and respective medical institutions including NUST, PM&DC, Higher Education Commission and CPSP etc. Now the question arises where do we proceed from here onward.

One of the most important recommendations is that Pakistan must form a National Committee on Biomedical journals which should fix quality criteria for recognition of these journals. We have time and again highlighted the importance of this issue.[2,3] It was heartening to note when the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council took an initiative but unfortunately it proved to be an exercise in futility.[4] As such recognition of a biomedical journal by the PM&DC does not necessarily guarantee about its standard and quality though the authors publishing their manuscripts do get the necessary credit for selection and promotion in medical institutions. Had the PM&DC been successful to evaluate the biomedical journals on merit recognizing only those publications which are published regularly, practice peer review, the situation would have been much different today. At present the list of PM&DC recognized biomedical journals contains many journals which ceased publication long time ago and no one has bothered to re-evaluate these journals and update the list. It is a fact that tough the PM&DC recognized list of medical journals has over three dozen journals, those who actually practice peer review and are published regularly is less than a dozen. That is why the need was felt to have a National Committee consisting members with known intellectual integrity which could accomplish this task of evaluation of biomedical journals. It is also important because many postgraduates appearing in FCPS-II exam are required to write a Dissertation or publish at least two papers. Since the CPSP wishes these papers to

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be published in journals indexed in Medline which are only three or four, if this National Committee can recognize a few more journals after careful evaluation, it will come as a great help to these postgraduates since they wont have to wait for too long for publication of their manuscripts to qualify to sit in the final exam.[5]

While formal decisions on issues in which input is needed from various government agencies and other institutions like HEC may take some time, the medical journals editor can implement some of the suggestions and recommendations of the conference at their own. The new executive of Pakistan Medical Journalists Association (PMJA) one hopes will take initiative in this regard. Increased co-operation among the Editors will be extremely helpful in checking the menace of simultaneous submission to more than one journal, duplicate publication[6] and check plagiarism besides finding solutions to problems faced by medical editors. They can learn a lot from each other's experience and help each other in case of any pressure from different vested interests.

If they take a joint decision to punish those involved in unethical publication practices, it will send a strong message thus discouraging such unethical practices. The issue of gift authorship which is crossing all limits also needs to be tackled as it is not uncommon to see more than half a dozen names as authors despite the fact that only one or two have actually made any significant intellectual contribution in conducting the study and writing the manuscript to qualify as author as per the authorship criteria laid down by International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. (ICMJE). Again most of the journals particularly those published by different institutions have heads of these institutions as Chief Editors without any formal contribution. The same is true for most of the members of the Editorial Board which are there just as a showpiece as most of them do not make any contribution either. This also needs to be discussed and a decision taken to ensure that journals have functional editorial boards and chief editors. In order to overcome the shortage of competent and qualified reviewers, editors of various journals can help each other by inviting them to join their reviewer's database. This will not only overcome the problem of shortage of good reviewers but also help create better understanding and co-operation between editors.

Training of Editors is another important issue. Pakistan Medical Journalists Association in collaboration with different institutions, organizations and editors of various biomedical journals can arrange small Hands on Workshops on editing, training of editors and other support editorial staff. At the conference on medical editing while most of the important issues were discussed at length, deficiency of any Hands on Workshop was felt badly. Since financial constraints do not permit many editors to go abroad and attend different workshops, conferences on training of medical editors, we need to organize this at our own benefiting from the material available on internet, listserv of WAME and EMAME besides utilizing all other available resources including books and journals which is cost effective. EMAME has a Committee on Editorship headed by Dr. Farrokh Habibzadeh from Iran and its help can be sought. Plagiarism is yet another menace spreading fast in Pakistan. Now different software's are available on the net to check plagiarism but medical editors need to be trained to use such software. Here again the PMJA can organize some training sessions for the Editors and we do have experts like Dr. Ahmad Badar within the country who can be extremely helpful. Let us all benefit from his experience and it should not be a difficult task. However, the most important thing is that are the Editors willing to learn? An intelligent and competent Editor has to be a life long learner which is a part of Continued Professional Development. We wish that the PMJA will chalk out a detailed training programme and once it is accomplished, necessary help and assistance can be sought from institutions like WHO EMRO, HEC, CPSP, PMRC, Pakistan

Science Foundation and PM&DC. A lot can be accomplished through joint struggle provided no one bothers as to who takes the credit. As the things stand today, the future of medical journalism in Pakistan is quite bright and in the days to come we will have many more biomedical journals which will succeed in getting indexed internationally.

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