

*Editorial*

## INTELLECTUAL INTEGRITY: EVALUATION OF QUALITY, STANDARDS OF PAKISTANI MEDICAL AND DENTAL JOURNALS

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During the past few years there has been an increase in the number of medical and dental journals published from Pakistan. However the quality and standard of their contents vary from exceptionally good to not so good and extremely poor. Some of these journals do not have any peer review system but till recently the authors used to get the same credit irrespective of the fact in which journal their manuscripts were published. In some cases most of the rejected manuscripts found place in other journals that do not have any peer review system at all. Rejection of sub-standard manuscripts by some of the standard journals also forced some healthcare professionals and institutions to start their own publications so as to publish their articles and escape this academic scrutiny through peer review system, which is extremely important to improve the quality and standards of the manuscripts before they are accepted for publication. Since Pakistan Medical & Dental Council till recently did not have any system of evaluating the quality and standard of various journals and all of them were recognized for credit, it did not make any difference to the authors of these substandard manuscripts as it served their purpose of getting the desired credit for selection by respective Public Service Commissions and promotion to next higher grades.

This issue was discussed in detail at the

Editorial Board meetings of Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences held at Karachi and Lahore on April 29th 2000 and September 9th 2000 respectively.<sup>1</sup> It was suggested that the PM&DC must review its policy of recognition of medical /dental journals and lay down some criteria for evaluation and recognition. However many members of the Editorial Board were not in favor of giving this authority to the PM&DC. They had expressed reservations that the composition of this body is such that it cannot be expected to take academic decisions based purely on merit. They suggested that the Federal Health Ministry should be requested to constitute an independent committee for this purpose, which should consist of academicians with proven accomplishments whose intellectual integrity could not be questioned. After lot of discussion, it was agreed that let the PM&DC do this job hoping that it won't repeat its past mistakes which have seriously tarnished its image and credibility. While making these suggestions<sup>2</sup> we had stated that:-

"Some people might object to regulating and monitoring of the medical /dental journals by PM&DC since its credibility has become question mark on various issues. In the past it often took decisions based on personal likes and dislikes of a few members rather than merit. But this monitoring and regulating of standards has to be done by someone. Hence why not by the PM&DC. One hopes that it will come up to the expectations. However, in order to ensure that this new system works smoothly it is important that the members of the committee entrusted

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with the job of evaluation of the Journals consist of people of integrity and with proven academic record. It is also important that anyone who is actively involved in publication or is on the Editorial Board of any Journal is not inducted as a member of this Committee. The Council can select people from outside the Council members for this committee if the need be. Medical professionals who are known to be intellectually corrupt should be kept at a safe distance. The names of these committee members should be made public and circulated to the Editors of the Medical and Dental Journals. These members then must remain in touch with the Editors of Medical and Dental Journals, hold meetings with them from time to time and benefit from their expertise in this field which will go a long way in not only improving the standards of Pakistani medical and dental journals but also help achieve this objective without much difficulty. It will also enhance the credibility of the PM&DC." We had also suggested that "the credit criteria laid down by the PM&DC for various types of manuscripts also needs some further improvement for which the Council can seek opinion of Editors of Medical and Dental Journals."<sup>2</sup>

These issues were also taken up personally with Prof. M. Hayat Zafar President of PM&DC who not only appreciated the idea of standardization and categorization of the medical and dental journals but also asked for some assistance to formulate the guidelines for evaluation of the journals. Prof. M. Hayat Zafar is extremely receptive to any new but constructive suggestions which could help improve the standard of Pakistani medical and dental journals and also helps improve the credibility of the PM&DC itself.

It was after all this academic exercise that for the first time in the history of Pakistan Medical & Dental Council a meeting was held on April 14th 2001, which discussed all these issues. A thirteen-member committee was also constituted to evaluate the quality and standard of various medical and dental journals under the chairmanship of Prof. S. M. Rab an eminent physician and former

President of CPSP. This committee includes the following:<sup>3</sup>

1. Prof. S. M. Rab  
Karachi.
2. Prof. Mumtaz Hassan  
Principal and Chief Executive,  
KEMC, Mayo Hospital, Lahore.
3. Prof. Ellahi Bakhsh Soomro  
Principal, DMC, Karachi.
4. Prof. S. Haider Bukhari  
Principal, Khyber Medical College, Peshawar
5. Prof. Arab Ghulam Rasool  
Principal, Bolan Medical College, Quetta.
6. Prof. M. Sultan Farooqui  
President CPSP, Karachi.
7. Dr. Mrs. Shehnaz Javed Khan,  
Dean, Postgraduate Medical Institute,  
Lahore.
8. Dr. Mohammad Imran  
Dean, Postgraduate Medical Institute,  
Hayatabad Medical Complex, Peshawar
9. Dr. Tariq Zaman Ahmad  
Principal, de'montmorency College of  
Dentistry, Lahore.
10. Dr. Tahir Shafi  
Dean, Sheikh Zayed Postgraduate Medical  
Institute, Lahore.
11. Dr. Azhar Mahmood Qureshi  
Chief Executive, PIMS, Islamabad.
12. Dr. Sajid Maqbool  
Prof. of Pediatrics, Shaikh Zayed Hospital,  
Lahore.
13. Dr. Zafrullah Chaudhry, Lahore.

The Pakistan Medical & Dental Council later issued a list of recognized medical and dental journals, which includes the following,<sup>3</sup>

1. All medical journals included in the Index Medicus.
2. All medical journals enlisted in the Excerpta Medica.
3. Journal of College of Physicians and Surgeons of Pakistan, Karachi.
4. Pakistan Journal of Obstetric and Gynecology, Islamabad.
5. Journal of Pakistan Medical Association (Centre) Karachi.
6. Medical Channel, Karachi.

7. Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences, Karachi.
8. Journal of Pakistan Orthopedic Association, Lahore.
9. Pakistan Pediatric Journal, Lahore.
10. Pakistan Oral and Dental Journal, Peshawar.
11. Journal of Surgery, PIMS, Islamabad.
12. Biomedica from Lahore.
13. Pakistan Journal of Gastroenterology, Lahore.
14. Pakistan Journal of Medical Research, Islamabad.
15. Pakistan Journal of Pathology, Rawalpindi.
16. Pakistan Heart Journal, Karachi.
17. Pakistan Armed Forces Medical Journal, Rawalpindi.
18. Pakistan Postgraduate Medical Journal, PGMI Lahore.
19. Proceedings from SZPMI Lahore.
20. Journal of Ayub Medical College, Abbottabad.
21. The Professional, Faisalabad.
22. Journal of Postgraduate Medical Institute, LRH Peshawar.
23. Pakistan Journal of Ophthalmology, Lahore.
24. Pakistan Journal of Chest Diseases, Karachi.
25. Pakistan Journal of Cardiology, Karachi.
26. Annals of KEMC, Lahore.
27. Journal of Surgery, Karachi.
28. Pakistan Journal of Pharmacology, Karachi.
29. Annals of Abbasi Shaheed Hospital, KM&DC Karachi.
30. Journal of Pakistan Association of Dermatologists, Karachi.
31. Journal of Rawalpindi Medical College, Rawalpindi.

The PM&DC also categorized the various journals keeping the journals listed from 1-6 in category A while the remaining medical and dental journals were put in category B which in its wisdom felt that they still need some improvement. In category C the following journals were included which meant that they have been derecognised: -

1. Pakistan Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, Karachi.
2. JPIMS Islamabad.

3. Pakistan Journal of Ophthalmology USA
4. Pakistan Journal of Otorhinolaryngology, Karachi.
5. Pakistan Journal of Surgery, Karachi.
6. Journal of Mother and Child Welfare Lahore.
7. Journal of Infectious Diseases, Karachi.
8. Journal of Anesthesia and Critical Care, Aga Khan University, Karachi.
9. The Medical Scrutiny, Karachi. (The actual name is Medical Spectrum)
10. Pakistan Journal of Neurology, Lahore.
11. Journal of Medical Sciences, Peshawar.
12. Pakistan Journal of Pediatric Surgery, Lahore.
13. Medical Forum Lahore.
14. Pakistan Journal of Neurological Surgery, Lahore.

A critical analysis of the above decisions shows that the PM&DC has miserably failed to do justice and come up to the expectations. It has also strengthened apprehensions being expressed by many that the council was not capable of taking up such academic issues which needed an input from the academicians. Firstly by constituting the committee itself, it looks the Council opted for people heading various undergraduate and postgraduate medical institutions irrespective of considering their own academic achievements, accomplishments and suitability to undertake this responsibility. It is a well-known secret how the institution heads are selected in Pakistan. Most often (exceptions are always there) it is the political connections in the power corridors in Pakistan, which matters rather than competence and ability. Merit is most often ignored that is one of the important reasons for our academic decay. We need academicians for this job and not administrators, something, which the Council appears to have overlooked. Then what will happen when some one is transferred or retires from these posts? The new incumbent may not necessarily be a suitable person for this academic task. In fact some of these committee members have already retired or transferred to some other institutions. The ignorance of the PM&DC Secretariat is also evident from the fact that it does not even know the correct name of some of the

journals as they appear in the list like Medical Scrutiny instead of Medical Spectrum.

The Council also failed to heed to our advice that only people with proven academic achievements, writing prowess and editorial know how should be entrusted this responsibility. If members of this committee were asked to provide details of their own academic achievements during the past five years, it will reveal that many of them have not written and published any article during the past five years. So how they can be entrusted the responsibility of evaluating the standard of medial and dental journals? Again we had suggested that those who are actively involved in publication of any medical or dental journal should not be made member of this committee. It is against the spirit of justice because one cannot judge one's own conduct. Hence it is not at all surprising if two members of this committee got their own journals enlisted in Category-A which has raised many eyebrows of well-known medical writers and academicians in the medical circles. This has no doubt tarnished the image of the PM&DC as a body besides putting a question mark on the intellectual integrity of the Chairman of this Committee Prof. S. M. Rab in particular because after all he will get all the credit or discredit for whatever decisions are taken by this committee. The committee members and the Chairman will find it extremely difficult to justify their decisions. Some of these journals are not being published regularly and many do not even bother to publish an Index of Subjects and Authors. The committee took these decisions under what circumstances only the Committee and its Chairman must know? Yet another suggestions we had made was that "healthcare professionals who are known to be intellectually corrupt should be kept at a safe distance". This was not done hence as expected they played politics. Our own journal "Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences" which is the second oldest medical journal (after JPMA) being published regularly for the last eighteen years was put in Category B despite the fact that we meet the criteria laid down by the Council itself for inclusion in Category-A. If they had any

doubt, the Council could have contacted us to clear any misgivings or misconceptions but this was not done. What was more surprising was the fact that we were not even informed of this decision which we came to know only from one of our Editorial Board Members from Lahore. So we were punished for having initiated this whole academic exercise and help the PM&DC to prepare the criteria for evaluation of the medical and dental journals. When President of PM&DC Prof. M. Hayat Zafar as well as Chairman of this Committee Prof. S. M. Rab were contacted, they promised to look into the matter and rectify the earlier decisions but even after two months, we have yet to hear from the PM&DC in this regard.

Participating in this academic debate Dr. Saeed Farooq<sup>4</sup> has raised an interesting and very important issue. He says that "mushroom growth of medical journals has also affected the status of quality journals. The first most important question he has raised is that is it not paradoxical that the trainees for FCPS can publish their papers in lieu of Dissertation only in a journal indexed in Index Medicus and in JCPSP. Practically this means that they can publish these articles only in two journals in Pakistan while their trainers can publish their papers for promotion in more than forty journals. This needs to be addressed in the guidelines by the PM&DC." He has also suggested that an impact factor for the local journals can be constructed by the PM&DC or the association of Editors of Medical Journals.<sup>4</sup> The impact factor measures the frequency with which "average article" in a journal is cited in the literature and thus having impact on the scientific community.<sup>5</sup> However some of his suggestions cannot be supported like fixing the upper limit of number of medical and dental journals recognized by the PM&DC.<sup>4</sup> Let us have as many journals as possible maintaining a reasonable standard and quality of contents with a good peer review system, which must be practiced by each and every journal. Is it not surprising to note that while this discrepancy in the policy of CPSP of allowing the FCPS candidates to publish their papers in lieu of Dissertations only in two

medical journals can be picked up by an enlightened faculty member of a postgraduate medical institute but the worthy Council members of the CPSP cannot. It appears as if most of them perhaps are there only to be used as rubber stamp the decisions taken by someone else which are most often politically motivated rather than based on merit upholding the spirit of justice and fairplay. That is why the CPSP is often accused of spreading intellectual corruption among the medical profession thereby destroying the moral fabric of healthcare professionals and the medical institutions as well. We had also commented on this issue earlier.<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Saeed Farooq has also made another interesting observation regarding credit for various types of manuscripts published.<sup>4</sup> In its wisdom the committee constituted by the PM&DC felt that "the review article will have no credit. These articles are supposed to come from experts who do not require any credit".<sup>7</sup> It also shows that the committee members are ignorant of the fact that writing a review article is the greatest punishment an author can have. Often it is more difficult and properly written review article is sometimes more the worth of the original article. It is a critical review of literature, rather than just restating and rewriting the findings from other articles, which a proper review article must be, hence it is usually more demanding. This depicts the true scholarship of the author".<sup>4</sup> This discrepancy was pointed out by us earlier. Our experience in Pakistan reveals that sometimes postgraduates or junior faculty members under the guidance of a senior faculty member write these review articles and they do need credit for this exercise. As pointed out earlier, the PM&DC must seek the opinion of Editors of Medical and Dental Journals regarding this credit criteria.<sup>2</sup>

Pakistan Medical & Dental Council must also try to find out why it failed to check the unethical and corrupt practices of its former Secretary? Why its credibility is so low? Previously it was said that it is the DG Health who as President of PM&DC often takes the decisions, which are later endorsed by the members but this is no more true. Now the PM&DC has an

elected President Prof. M. Hayat Zafar. There is nothing wrong in any system whether the Council is headed by the DG Health or an elected President but it is how any particular system is made to work which matters. If it is decided once and for all that merit will prevail in all cases and justice will be done which is also seen to have been done irrespective of the fact as to who is going to be affected, the PM&DC will regain its lost prestige, status and credibility. Now since the President has to be elected by the members, he has to keep them happy by inducting them in various committees whether they are suitable for that responsibility or not. This is something that appears to have happened while constituting this committee to evaluate the medical and dental journals. Interestingly some names can be seen in more than one important committee that also shows the political influence of some of these members. We as a Nation have not matured enough to practice democracy in its true sense which certainly does not suit us at least for the time being. As in the national perspective, we need to have some "controlled democracy" in the PM&DC as well. The DG Health must have the final say in some decisions so as to ensure that members cannot exert their pressure and influence on PM&DC President. PM&DC must also consider why its decision regarding de-recognition and temporary recognition of some medical and dental colleges has been openly rejected and challenged by the Sindh Government as stated by Sindh Health Minister Major Gen.(Retd) Ahsan Ahmad? On the face of it there is nothing wrong in the delayed decisions taken by the PM&DC as regards recognition of private medical and dental colleges but since some of the members of the recognition committee have been playing politics, blackmailing and harassing the private medical and dental colleges, it lost the moral support which should have been forthcoming from every one in the medical profession and the government. Hence sooner the PM&DC gets rid of its foolish friends, the better it will be for its own credibility.

Pakistan Medical Journalists Association (PMJA) has already taken the initiative to

improve the peer review system practiced by the medical and dental journals. On a suggestion from Dr. Sarwar J. Zuberi, the newly elected President of PMJA Dr. Maqbool H. Jafary has constituted a committee comprising of senior medical editors, which will hold workshops in Rawalpindi-Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi for the Editors, Reviewers and Referees besides members of the Editorial Board of various medical and dental journals. Participation in these workshops will be purely voluntary.

Let us not forget that the prime objective of this academic exercise of evaluating the standard of various medical and dental journals is not to punish, victimize any journal but to improve the quality of their contents and their overall standard.

### SUGGESTIONS

Keeping in view the above mentioned prime objective, we would like to make the following suggestions:-

1. The committee formed for the purpose of evaluating the quality and standard of medical and dental journals should be re-constituted. It should have five to seven members. No one affiliated with any journal should be included in this committee.
2. There should also be a provision of a backup in case some of these members are unable to attend the meetings.
3. Those selected for this responsibility must be men with proven academic accomplishments, are aware of the concept of medical writing, publications fully conversant with the peer review system.
4. They must be men with unblemished academic record and their intellectual honesty and integrity must be unquestionable.
5. Instead of nominating heads of various medical institutions as done earlier, these nominations should be in person and for a period of three to five years. Based on their input to improve the standard and quality of contents of various medical and dental journals, they can be re-elected to this committee.

6. This committee must keep a close liaison with Editors of various medical and dental journals. Decision about any journal must be conveyed to the concerned publication immediately and the deficiencies must be pinpointed in writing. This means that the committee members will have to work and only those who are bitten with an academic bug can perform this job not the medical politicians.
7. The credit criteria for various types of write-ups should also be revised in consultation with the Editors of medical journals because they are in a much better position to give an input, which reflects the professional weightage.
8. Medical and Dental Journals should be asked to intimate any change of Editor, Publisher, place of publication, addition in the Editorial Board and any other information regarding their publication to the PM&DC Secretariat which should maintain complete records about all the journals and this must be constantly updated.
9. All actions, decisions of the Committee must be aimed at meeting the prime objective of improving the quality and standard of the journals. In no way it should give any impression of trying to control the editorial or publication policy of these journals, which would defeat the very purpose.

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