

Proceedings

PROCEEDINGS OF WORKSHOP ON PEER REVIEW SYSTEM HELD AT KARACHI AND LAHORE

Shaukat Ali Jawaid

Pakistan Medical Journalists Association (PMJA) organized a workshop on Peer Review System (PRS) at Karachi on September 21st 2002. This was the first such meeting ever held in Pakistan which aroused lot of interest and attracted twenty five editors of medical and dental journals, reviewers, referees and authors. A similar workshop was later organized at Fatima Jinnah Medical College Lahore on September 28th. The programme consisted of brief presentations followed by interactive discussion in which almost everyone present actively participated. Peer Review System, it was pointed out does improve the quality of manuscripts but it cannot check any academic misconduct. The participants felt that the medical and dental journals must have a statistician on the editorial board and they should always first conduct an internal review before sending the manuscripts for external review.

Dr. Maqbool H. Jafary President of PMJA who is also Chairman of Editorial Board of Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences in his introductory remarks said that this was a humble beginning and in future hands on workshops will be organized in small groups wherein the participants will review the manuscripts and present their reports.

History, Advantages and Flaws of PRS

Speaking about the history, advantages and flaws of PRS, Dr. Jafary said that peer review has almost three hundred years old history. It was first initiated by Royal Society of Medicine in London. In the 19th and 20th century peer review for articles and grant applications

developed independently but haphazardly in response to progressive increase in specialization. It was Ernest Hart former Editor of BMJ who presented this system for the first time to the American Medical Editors Association in 1893. However till fifty years later it was rarely practiced by journals like JAMA. PRS had a slow adoption because the editors needed manuscripts, which were not many, to fill up their pages and they usually discouraged this rigorous and time-consuming process. It was in 1985 that Stephen Lock former Editor of BMJ published his book "A difficult balance" which was followed by four conferences on Peer Review in 1989 and 1993 in Chicago in USA, in Prague in 1997 and more recently in Barcelona in 2001. Now we see research into editorial processes by leading medical journals.

PRS became institutionalized in 1940s because of increasing complexity of subjects and concern for quality of manuscripts. The objective of this exercise of PRS was to assist editors in the selection of quality manuscripts for publication. In the 70s the doctors were reluctant to look at research papers without sticker of peer review although the ultimate responsibility for integrity and honesty rests with the authors. More recent developments in PRS include the open peer review which was initiated by "Cardiovascular Research" in 1994. In this system the names of the reviewers are known to the authors and reviewers know who are the authors. Now the masked system of peer review is under challenge. It is believed that the introduction of open peer review will make the reviewers more responsible and accountable.

Correspondence:

Shaukat Ali Jawaid

E-mail: shaukat@pulsepakistan.com

PRS, Dr. Jafary said, offers constructive criticism. It is a quality assurance system. Evidence shows that it does improve the quality of the manuscripts and their readability. It also helps the editors and authors to detect flaws in the manuscripts before they are published. In fact it is a shortcut for fairness and objectivity. The PRS offers advantages to all the stakeholders, which include editors, reviewers, authors and the readers. The editors feel more comfortable through expert opinion since the journal's prestige depends on it. The reviewers appreciate being recognized as experts. It also offers them an opportunity to learn about the subject from others besides learning the art of scientific criticism. For the authors the only hurdle worth jumping is the scrutiny through experts. They most often appreciate the assistance and constructive criticism. Readers get reassurance as regards quality of the manuscript while science also benefits from careful examination. However, there are serious allegations against the reviewers. They have been labeled as partial, biased, jealous, ignorant, incompetent, and too busy and many have conflict of interest. Allegations against the system are that it is unreliable, unfair and fails to validate or authenticate, it is unstandardized, hence open to bias. PRS is also expensive, insufficiently tested, patchy at detecting methodological defects and extremely poor at detecting academic misconduct (fraud). Despite so many allegations PRS is still popular and all those involved in this wish to keep on practicing it because the alternatives like audit are worse. Hence, PRS is considered to be better than nothing Dr. Jafary added.

How to do peer review of a manuscript

Mr. Shaukat Ali Jawaid Managing Editor of Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences discussed how to do peer review of a manuscript. Peer review, he stated is the central activity in increasing quality of manuscript. It is poorly understood process which is under intense scrutiny and controversy. A Peer Reviewer is defined as a person who assesses the merits of a manuscript submitted for publication in a

Journal. Whenever one is invited to review a manuscript by a journal, the reviewer should not hurry to accept the invitation though there is a temptation to do so as it means recognition as an expert. It is advisable for the reviewers to ask additional information about the journal and try to understand their working. They must have sufficient time to do justice and must be watchful of conflict of interest. They should ask the editors for enough time to meet deadlines. Novice reviewers might require six to twelve hours to review a manuscript, which can be done within three to four hours by experts. The reviewers are supposed to grade the manuscript for originality, quality, accuracy, readability and interest to the readers. They must complete the detailed questionnaire about these qualities and also assign a priority score. The reviewers are supposed to review the manuscript in a systematic way. They should read the instructions to the authors published in that particular journal from where they have received the manuscript for review and follow the checklist provided by the editors. They have to look at the strength and weaknesses of the manuscript, look at the ethical aspects, ensure that the presentation is good and the message is clear. Interpretation of results must also be looked at carefully. It is important that the authors convey the message properly which is understood by the readers.

Evaluation of analytical and statistical methods, overall quality of manuscript is important. At times the reviewers may not be able to do analytical and statistical evaluation and it should be left for the statistician. The reviewers are supposed to write the report and summarize their comments. Their comments/report should help the editor judge what to do with the manuscript and help authors how to improve the manuscript. The reviewers are supposed to ensure that their report is in accordance with instructions to authors of the journal. They should use easy to understand language. The report must be typed instead of hand written notes. The reviewers should summarize the manuscript in a Para before detailed comments. At times the authors may not agree

with the reviewers comments or the reviewers might not have understood the manuscript while reviewing. The reviewers must be mindful of the facts that the authors spend lot of time in collecting data, conducting the study, writing and revising the manuscript many times before submitting for publication. There is no gain from destructive criticism. Comments about language, grammar and spellings should be reserved for the editor and not the authors. They must not use this opportunity to take revenge from authors. Ideal reviewers concentrate on manuscript rather than authors. Derogatory remarks/comments will discourage all those involved in the peer review. The conflict of interest must be mentioned even if you have already communicated to the editor. Acknowledge help received from others during the review. The reviewers should be mindful of their own deficiencies and weaknesses. They do not have to comment on each and everything in the manuscript on areas, which may fall beyond their expertise. It is extremely important that the reviewers do not make use of the work described in the manuscript. They must mention the source of their comments clearly to strengthen their report. If they decide to sign their comments, it means the editors are at liberty to disclose their identity to the authors. At times they have to follow the Journal's policy in this regard. In case more time is needed, it should be communicated to the editor concerned and ask for more time. Manuscript should be kept confidential as it is a sacred document, hence due importance should be given. At times the editors do send comments from other reviewers on the same manuscript to reviewers, which helps them to assess their own performance. Some sort of reward for the reviewers is also being discussed although at present it is not feasible for most of the journals published from Pakistan.

How to set up a Peer Review System

Prof. Abdus Samad, Editor of Pakistan Journal of Cardiology spoke on how to set up a peer review system. Good reviewers Prof. Samad said are difficult to find. There are about

two hundred cardiologists and only ten or twelve of them write. Only those who have written themselves can smell some flaws and be good reviewers. While science favours criticism, religion does not. The reviewers must see if the title fits correctly and the methodology is correct. People in basic sciences, it is said, are better and good reviewers. They are more interested in academics. Qualities of a good reviewer are not yet fixed. However, those who are trained in epidemiology and statistics prove to be good reviewers. The PRS process involves authors of the manuscripts, editors and reviewers. The authors send manuscript to the editors who send it to reviewers. The reviewers are not supposed to communicate with the authors but with the editors. The editors should establish a process of evaluation of manuscript. It can be done by the editor himself, by members of the editorial board or through external reviewers or a combination of all. For important manuscripts, a system of rapid review is a must. The editors have to fix deadlines for the reviews and in case they do not hear from them, the manuscript should be sent to another reviewer. In case the manuscript is of an outstanding quality and a topic of current interest, the editor may accept the manuscript. The editors can reject the manuscript without outside review if the subject is outside the purview of the journal, similar topic is under print, the manuscript is of poor quality and criteria of submission is not met. It is the editor who has the final authority to accept or reject the recommendations of the reviewers.

It depends on the editor if he/she wishes to disclose the identity of reviewers in case the reviewer has signed his report/comments. Editors are responsible to keep track of reviewers and manuscripts. Monitoring the progress of review is a very difficult job. For this the editors can use computer to set up an alert system and automatic reminders in case of delays. Editors should set up a reviewer's database by identifying potential reviewers. At times the authors can also be asked to name the reviewers. The key issues in selection of good reviewers are the competence and ability in

their area of specialization, their contribution to medical literature and willingness to participate in such academic activities. Their seniority and standing in the profession does not matter much. Masking the manuscripts at times does not work and the reviewers are able to identify the authors in almost 50% of the cases. Review is very costly in terms of time. Editors must ensure not to send too many manuscripts to the reviewers. They must be acknowledged by publishing their name at the end of the year or through other means, which are feasible.

DISCUSSION

During the discussion Prof. Anwar Wiqar highlighted the importance of impact factor and citation of the manuscript. It was also stated that there is no encouragement to the local journals. It is important that we publish good studies in our own journals so that their standard is improved. All efforts should be made to improve the quality of Pakistani journals so that more of them are included on Medline. Prof. Ejaz Ahmad Vohra opined that we must publish only what is a good quality manuscript. Dr. Imtiaz Siddiqui referred to academic fraud, misconduct and inflated data. There have been instances when supervisors have published the work of postgraduates with their name. Dr. Sadiya Ahsan Pal said that there was nothing wrong with it. It is the supervisor who gives the PGs the idea, plans the study, helps to write it for them and revises it many times. The supervisor is involved with the writing of dissertation or thesis throughout. Dr. Tasnim Ahsan also opined that most of the work is done by the supervisor or under their supervision. She also suggested that in future we must have small groups to review the manuscript and then present the findings. That will provide much better opportunities for learning. Mr. Shaukat Ali Jawaaid pointed out that International Committee of Medical Journal Editors had clearly laid down the criteria for authorship which must be followed.

Dr. Aisha Mehnaz felt the question of senior or junior does not arise. People younger in age

if they are competent, they can do a good job. Prof Samad said that today's juniors are tomorrow's seniors. It was also pointed out that each hospital should have a responsible functional ethics committee which should help and facilitate research activity rather than discouraging it. Some participant's felt that it should be mentioned as to who has reviewed the manuscript. Prof. Ghulam Ali said that reviewers must get some reward. At least they can be issued some certificates.

Prof. M. Ishaque highlighted the lack of facilities for medical research in our institutions. PM&DC and medical institutions do not follow their own recommendations regarding credit of publications while recruiting new faculty members. The journal editors should be author friendly and help them to improve their manuscripts. Simply rejecting the manuscript is not the answer. Many journals, he said have show piece editorial boards. Mr. Shaukat Ali Jawaaid referred to the academic misconduct case involving an author who published two papers in British Journal of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. Later it was revealed that it was all cooked up data. Hence the Chief Editor himself had to resign and also leave the President-ship of Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. The ICMJE has now recommended that Editors can ask for raw data if they have some suspicions regarding any study. Dr. Maqbool H. Jafary opined that it would be the intellectual honesty, which will decide about the authorship. It was also suggested that journals should have a statistician on the editorial board and they must do internal review before sending the manuscripts for external review. Dr. Tasnim Ahsan also highlighted another issue with regard to spellings because some authors use American while others follow English spellings and one is at a loss as to which one to follow while reviewing the manuscript. Dr. Iftikhar Jan said that the editors should provide the manuscript on floppy diskette to the reviewers which will make the job much easy. Dr. Tasnim Ahsan said that if there is some good useful scientific data, the reviewers should not hesitate to re-

write the manuscript if need be. Dr. Maqbool Jafary said that when the reviewers accept the responsibility of reviewing the manuscript, they must do justice to it. Peer review it was said also creates a fear of rejection among the authors. The editors must encourage the writers and they must distinguish between quality manuscripts.

Prof. Rasheed Jooma felt that minimum standards must be maintained at all cost. He also suggested that comments by the reviewers should be published at the end of the manuscript. The editors should do the first internal review. The reviewers can then be asked to check it from technical point of view. References must be marked in the text. Source of funding of the studies must be mentioned. It was pointed out that while it is nice to talk about ideals but one has to see what is feasible and practical in our circumstances. Editors have to work under lot of stress and strains and it was not at all an easy job to edit a medical journal maintaining quality of manuscripts and certain standard of the journal since almost all the journals are not financially viable. However concerted efforts are needed to provide more training facilities for the authors, help and assistance to the reviewers and they all should help the editors to improve the standard of the journals. It is a gradual process and hopefully in the days to come, things will be much better.

Those who participated in the workshop included Prof. Abdus Samad, Dr. Maqbool H. Jafary, Mr. Shaukat Ali Jawaaid, Prof. Rasheed Jooma, Prof. Ejaz Ahmad Vohra, Dr. Tasnim Ahsan, Prof. M. A. Arif, Prof. M. Ishaq, Prof. Inkisar Ali, Prof. Ziauddin Sheikh, Prof. Ghulam Ali, Prof. Anwar Wiqar, Prof. Zaman Sheikh, Dr. Inayatullah, Dr. Waris Qidwai, Dr. Imtiaz Siddiqui, Dr. Iftikhar A. Jan, Dr. Aisha Mehnaz, Dr. Syed Jamal Raza, Dr. Niloufer Sultan Ali, Dr. Shahab Ghani, Dr. Syed Zahid Rasheed, Dr. Sadiha Ahsan Pal, Dr. Shaukat Ali and Dr. Masood Jawaaid

Prof. M. Akbar Chaudhry the then Principal Executive Officer of Fajma Jinnah Medical College and Ganga Ram Hospital was the chief

organizer for the workshop at Lahore. It was attended by thirty writers, reviewers, referees and editors of various medical journals from Lahore, Rawalpindi-Islamabad and Multan. Welcoming the participants he thanked the PMJA for selecting FJMC as the venue for this important event.

Dr. Maqbool H. Jafary was the first speaker who talked about the history, flaws and benefits of peer review system while Mr. Shaukat Ali Jawaaid Managing Editor of Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences discussed how to do a peer review of a manuscript. Dr. Maqbool H. Jafary in his second presentation discussed how to set up a peer review system while Dr. N. Rehan Director PMRC Research Center at Ganga Ram Hospital highlighted the common mistakes committed by the writers and editors of various medical journals. He gave examples from different articles published in various medical journals to show that it appears they do not have any peer review system otherwise they would commit such basic mistakes like how to give information in table form, calculation of percentage etc. He was of the view that every medical and dental journal must have an input from a statistician preferably who has done Master in Public Health (MPH).

The presentations were followed by lively discussion in which most of the participants actively participated. Dr. Maqbool H. Jafary acted as the moderator for the discussion. Prof. Lateef Chaudhry former Prof. of Ophthalmology at FJMC and Editor of Pakistan Journal of Ophthalmology said that so far we were doing peer review in a haphazard manner in darkness. After having attended this workshop we will be able to improve the quality of papers and our journals. We are now moving in the positive direction. We have included eight members in different sub-specialties of ophthalmology in the Editorial Board and their services are used to review papers. Editors, he opined must be fair to every one and it is important to train the writers.

Prof. Javed Akram and many other participants also felt that there is a need to have an ongoing programme for teaching and

training of authors and experts how to review a manuscript. Dr. Sabrina Pal Consultant Dermatologist who is associated with Pakistan Journal of Dermatology opined that this is an evolution process and holding of this workshop was a step in the right direction. She felt that medical institutions must hold regular Journal Clubs where postgraduates should be asked to make presentations. There should be close collaboration between the PGs and the faculty members.

Prof. Majid Chaudhry Professor of Surgery at KEMC and Editor of Annals of KEMC said that a functional department of medical education should be established at each medical institution. He further suggested that there should be a chair of Professor of Medical Education, which should organize such activities on regular basis. Medical Writing should be included in the curriculum. Prof. M Naeem Khan former Prof. of Pediatric Surgery at PIMS in Islamabad said that authors are more careful while submitting the manuscript to a peer review journal. There is also a fear of rejection of the manuscript. Dr. Ghulam Mohyuddin Chaudhry from Multan felt that there should be some recognition of reviewers and they must get some credit in academics. There was lot of discussion on likely rewards for the reviewers and referees but it was felt that recognition, as an expert in a particular field by the journals and editors who send them the manuscripts for review was in itself a great recognition. Mr. Shaukat Ali Jawaaid said that many years ago it was suggested by the PMJA that the Principals of medical colleges should include at least a couple of lectures on medical writing to the final year class which will expose them to the art of writing. One does not need any major changes in the curriculum as the respective academic councils can take such decisions.

Prof. Tahir Saeed Haroon an eminent skin specialist and former Prof. of Dermatology at KEMC who has enormous contributions in the field of academics speaking at the occasion commended the efforts of PMJA to help improve quality of manuscripts and standard

of journals by holding workshop on such an important subject. He wished PMJA success in its future endeavors.

In his concluding remarks Prof. Mahmood Ali Malik Chairman of the Board of Governors of FJMC said that there are three aspects of medical educational programmes. They are teaching and training, patient care and medical research. Value of research, he said is judged by the citation rate. Our postgraduates have written many Thesis and Dissertations but no body is aware of the research they have done hence they are nowhere cited. However such efforts do help them learn how to write. He laid emphasis on honesty and integrity at the editorial level. In fact the integrity of every one the authors, reviewers and editors is at stake. There have been instances when some journals published back dated articles to help some people get promotion or selection through public service commissions. The quality of the manuscript is judged based on the journal in which it is published. The reputation of the journal is also at stake hence the editors must be careful to accept only quality manuscript for publication. He was of the view that it is important that the source of funding must be mentioned in the research studies to take care of the conflict of interest.

Those who participated in the workshop at Lahore included Prof. Mahmood Ali Malik, Prof. T. S. Haroon, Prof. M. Akbar Chaudhry Prof. Lateef Chaudhry, Prof. A. Majid Chaudhry, Prof. M. Naeem Khan from Islamabad, Prof. Javed Akram, Prof. Nazir Malik, Prof. Saad B. Malik, Prof. Ijaz Hiader, Dr. Mahfooz ur Rehman, Dr. Tehsin Iqbal from Multan, Prof. M. Aslam from Rawalpindi, Dr. S. N. H. Bokhari, Prof. Kamran Salik, Dr. Talat Naheed, Prof. S. Humayoon Shah, Dr. Sabrina Sohail Pal, Dr. Khawar Khursheed, Dr. Abdul Majid, Prof. Kaukab Bashir, Dr. Rukshanda Farid, Dr. Firdous Sultana, Dr. Neelam Hussain, Dr. Nadeem Hussain Butt, Dr. Zahida Rani, Dr. Mohammad Nadeem, Dr. Tariq Rashid, Dr. Anjum Shafi, Dr. Nuzhat Parveen Khawaja, Dr. Farah Naz and Dr. Nausheen Waseem Yousuf.