

## WHO REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON MEDICAL JOURNALS: ITS IMPACT ON PUBLICATIONS IN GENERAL AND PJMS IN PARTICULAR

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The First Regional conference on Medical Journal Publishing held at Cairo Egypt from October 7-9<sup>th</sup> 2003, which was organized by WHO EMRO region in collaboration with Saudi Medical Journal, was eventful in many respects. The main objective of the conference was strengthening medical journals publishing in the region which is indeed commendable. It is for the first time that such an initiative was taken by the WHO for which WHO EMRO as well as the sponsors i.e. Saudi Medical Journal deserve appreciation. While it highlighted the problems being faced by the medical journals in the region, it also showed the way how to overcome them with collective efforts so that the research conducted and published in this region does not go unnoticed. As pointed out by the Regional Director of WHO in his message to the conference<sup>1</sup> there are about four hundred medical and dental journals published from this region of which WHO has 315 on its database. Five new medical journals are published in the region every year but visibility of these journals is extremely poor meaning that they have little circulation. Since most of them do not have their own websites and online edition, it further reduces their visibility among the research scientists the world over.

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As pointed out during the conference deliberations, 95% of the medical journals indexed by Medline are from the so-called First World while only 5% are from the Developing Third World countries. WHO started the IMEMR (Index Medicus of Eastern Mediterranean Region) to break this vicious circle? A Meta analysis of manuscripts published by EMRO region showed that during the last ten years highest number of papers were from Saudi Arabia followed by Egypt and Pakistan. In order to ensure respectable standard medical journals, academic leadership in universities and medical institutions have to play a vital role. As the speakers from Iran, Egypt and Iraq pointed out, most of the authors write for promotions and once they get promotion, they give up writing or are not interested<sup>2</sup>. It looks so similar to the situation in Pakistan.

The number of medical and dental journals recognized by Ministry of Health in Iran is sixty-nine, Egypt has 140 medical journals while until before invasion by American and allied forces, Iraq had fourteen peer reviewed medical journals<sup>2</sup>. The number of medical and dental journals approved by the Pakistan Medical & Dental Council in Pakistan is twenty-nine.<sup>3</sup> Sixty-nine journals are published from Africa. Majority of these publications are published quarterly. Most of the journals indexed in Medline from Africa are from South Africa<sup>4</sup>. The conference highlighted the need to help the potential authors in pre peer review stage in writing, nurturing future authors, holding workshops on peer review, training of

editors, guiding the authors and better communication amongst the editors. Pakistan Medical Journalists Association (PMJA) is proud to have organized two workshops on Peer Review System for the first time in Pakistan<sup>5</sup>. The importance of having good functional editorial board, having a statistician on the Board, encouraging young professionals and able diligent young scientists was also highlighted. It was also suggested that authors and journals published from this region must address issues relevant to the region. Though a vast majority of the journals use Editorial Board Members as reviewers but it is desirable to separate the Reviewers and Referees from the Editorial Board Members.<sup>2</sup> This point was also highlighted during the workshop on manuscript writing held in Pakistan at Aga Khan University Hospital Karachi.<sup>6</sup> Peer Review it was stated though important and essential to ensure quality of the manuscripts, but it has little incentive. While a suggestion from one of the participants regarding sharing the manuscripts by those journals who receive too many manuscripts and have a long waiting list for publication with those journals who do not get enough manuscripts looked ridiculous, the suggestion for the WHO EMRO region to have its own website containing full text of manuscripts of all the medical journals published from the region, if it could be implemented, is praiseworthy. Printed format of the journals, it was emphasized, is not going to lose its importance. There is no competition between printed and electronic version instead they support and supplement each other. The major problems faced by these journals from the EMRO region as identified by various speakers included lack of training courses for Editors, financial problems, language problems, lack of communication between editors, lack of good quality manuscripts and lack of good reviewers.<sup>2</sup>

The six-member delegation from Pakistan actively participated in the conference deliberations. There were three presentations from Pakistan while to have one of the delegates from Pakistan, Dr. Maqbool H. Jafary elected

as Rapporteur, one of the three office bearers elected unanimously by the conference delegates was indeed an honour for Pakistan. Perhaps the most important outcome of the conference was the formation of a six member Task Force that will work out the details to formally establish the Eastern Mediterranean Association of Medical Editors (EMAME). Dr. Basim Yaqub from Saudi Medical Journal will co-ordinate the function of this task force and hopefully EMAME will be formally launched at the next regional conference on medical journals publishing scheduled to be held in Riyadh Saudi Arabia hosted by Saudi Medical Journal in November 2004.<sup>7</sup> A fully functional EMAME could be extremely helpful to help improve the standard of medical journals published from this Region. Earlier a similar attempt was made and Middle East Association of Science Editors was formed with office in Bahrain but somehow it has remained dormant and non-functional.<sup>8</sup> Another body with similar aims and objectives by the name of FAME (Forum for African Medical Journals Editors) was formed recently. The FAME general founding meeting was held in Addis Ababa in September 2003. Its secretariat is located at Kenya Medical Research Institute, Nairobi, Kenya and a List-Serve for FAME members and interested partners is now operational at fame@who.int.<sup>9</sup>

Most of the above mentioned problems have been repeatedly discussed at the Editorial Board meetings of Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences<sup>10,11</sup> Based on the experience of the last couple of years and in view of the suggestions and recommendations put forward during this meeting, we in Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences have taken certain decisions to reconstitute the Editorial Board with effect from January 1<sup>st</sup> 2004. Some of these decisions which will be implemented from next year are:-

- We will have separate Editorial Board from the Reviewers, Referees.
- All appointments in the Editorial Board will be for a period of three years, which can be further renewed based on their input

and contributions. Each editorial board member will be required to contribute at least 2 write-ups in a year which may include an editorial, original research or clinical updates. They will also suggest at least 8 reviewers for the reviewer's database.

- ❑ Reviewers database will be enlarged so as not to overburden the reviewers.
- ❑ Young, talented, energetic faculty members, researchers will be encouraged by inducting them in the Editorial Board as well as including them in the Reviewers database.
- ❑ First internal review of all the manuscripts received for publication will be completed within two to three weeks. Those manuscripts which are not selected for further peer review will be returned to the authors immediately so that they can submit them to other journals.
- ❑ The Review process will be accelerated putting important manuscripts based on original research with clinical importance on fast track review process.
- ❑ Young researchers, investigators will be offered some incentive by way of providing books helpful in medical writing besides cash prize for the best paper published in Pak J Med Sci by junior researcher during the year.
- ❑ All authors as well as reviewers will be required to disclose conflict of interest if any.
- ❑ Source of funding of the study will have to be mentioned.
- ❑ Ever since the start of our online edition of Pak J Med Sci, which contains full text of manuscripts published, visibility of Pak J Med Sci among the research scientists and healthcare professionals has increased tremendously. This is evident from the large number of manuscripts being received from overseas. We have now also added the PDF format on the website which will ensure that there is no need for providing re-prints to the authors.
- ❑ Access to the online edition of Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences will remain free so as to ensure that authors contributing their manuscripts get maximum readership and it is accessible to the readers all over the globe.
- ❑ Since we had to change the Title from "Specialist" to Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences from January 1<sup>st</sup> 2000, we have not been successful to get this journal indexed on Medline so far perhaps because of change in citation by different titles. Efforts will be intensified to get it included in Medline while constant efforts will be made to improve the quality of manuscripts accepted for publication. Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences is already covered by Embase Exerpta Medica of Netherland and indexed by IMEMR (WHO Index Medicus of EMRO region).
- ❑ Publication of special issues devoted to a particular specialty or disease with emphasis on practical aspects of medicine will be re-started. It will help the practicing physicians even in the far-flung areas of the country keeping them abreast of latest developments in medicine by way of Clinical Updates. A Guest Editor will be appointed for each issue who will be responsible for its editing. These issues will be published as Supplements to Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences.
- ❑ In order to improve the quality of Peer Review, we have started practicing open Peer Review since April 2003. So far up to 80% of the manuscripts were included in open peer review, which will be increased to 100% from January 2004.
- ❑ Authors may also suggest the Name of the Reviewers and if found feasible and appropriate, their input will also be obtained on the manuscripts.

All these measures we hope will go a long way in further improving the standard of the Journal and quality of manuscripts being accepted for publication.

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