

PUBLICATION GAME: AUTHOR'S IMPATIENCE AND THE EDITOR'S DILEMMA

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Ever since the universities, medical institutions and selection bodies have started giving credit to publications, the authors are quite impatient and they wish to get their manuscripts published and see them in print soon after their submissions. Little do they realize that there is no short cut and to get their manuscripts published in standard, quality peer reviewed medical journals, they have to wait since peer review is a bit complex process and it does take some time.

Apart from financial constraints and limitations of trained staff to work with, editors of biomedical peer reviewed journals in the developing countries face too many problems.^{1,2} They are required to carefully negotiate solution to these problems on constant basis which takes away their lot of time which otherwise could be used for much more productive purposes. Their problems are compounded when the authors either do not follow the instructions to authors, fail to respond to queries or arrange publication charges in time. Even if the Editors hoping that the authors would eventually respond go ahead with the further processing of their manuscripts so that the publication schedule is not disrupted, sometimes the authors keep quiet. Repeated requests fail to get any response and sometimes the authors are seen negotiating the publication of the same manuscripts in some other journal despite having given written undertaking confirming exclusive submission

to that particular journal.³ At times going through the manuscript raises the Editor's antennae and if he/she is a bit careful, it does arouse suspicion of plagiarism. However, despite the availability of many software to detect plagiarism, this problem seems to be getting worse and worse as the "cut and paste" from the net has made it quite easy.⁴

These authors do not realize that they can cheat and betray the trust of the editors only once and if such professional misconduct is communicated to their respective university, institution heads, it can have serious repercussions on their professional career. We have had to drop one or two manuscripts in each issue during the last two three years and replace it with other manuscripts at the last minute for the same reasons. Similar may be the experience with other editors as well.

We have now started sharing information with other Editor colleagues about authors who are being debarred from further acceptance of their manuscripts because of publication misconduct. Some editors feel that "except tracking down cases of plagiarism and then rejection of the articles, there is not much one can do. However, another step which the editors can take is to ban all future manuscripts from authors involved with the plagiarized article. This should be practiced without "officially announcing such a ban".⁴

Knowledge, Attitude and Practice (KAP) studies, questionnaire based surveys and repetition of me too studies that does not add anything to the medical literature which may help the authors improve their CV, hence quite helpful to them are neither good, high quality research nor they carry much weight age with the Editors. On the other hand Editors are more

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interested in original research, epidemiological community based studies, innovative procedures, interesting case reports or good reviews which also helps to improve the Impact Factor of the journal. Editors are always keen to publish such manuscripts early even processing them on fast track, getting them reviewed within weeks rather than couple of months which is taken in routine. A particular problem which we often face with some authors from Iran is that sometimes they send tables and manuscripts typed from right to left without realizing that English language is written from left to right. And if the tables are not indented, the whole figures in different columns get mixed up. In the past sometime we did try and corrected these manuscripts but no more. Now such manuscripts are returned to the authors for necessary corrections. Similarly some authors from Turkey at times use some Turkish words and then they wish it to be replaced with English words during processing which takes away lot of time. We have had some problems with authors from Jordan and Nigeria as well regarding simultaneous submission to other journals as well. Such professional misconduct by a few adversely affects other authors from these countries as well because then the editors have to be more cautious while processing their manuscripts. Requests from the authors to add or delete certain authors from the manuscripts which are certainly after thoughts for various reasons cannot be entertained as it is not considered ethical but at times the authors keep on insisting for such changes much to the frustration of the editors and eventually they are disappointed when such requests are turned down by the editors.

It is generally felt that personal contact with editors, prospective reviewers, members of the editorial board helps accelerate the peer review and publication process. Not only that it also helps decrease the waiting time besides minimizing the rejection rate.⁵ However, those authors who do not follow the established criteria are less likely to have their papers accepted in reputable journals.

Authors are impatient to get their manuscripts published in leading journals but the journals with high reputation attract greater number of manuscripts. These journals have to build their reputation in order to attract the academicians. This results in improving the quality of their journals. Authors are keen to publish in journals which ensure them greater citations while the editors are always looking for good quality papers for publication to have a greater impact on journal's reputation.⁵ Increase in the number of papers being accepted means decrease in rejection rate. Hence, an Editor's impatience is associated with fall in the journal's quality and standard.⁵

We have seen significant increase in the number of manuscripts being received for the last couple of years from various countries in the region which is indeed a very healthy sign and positive development which shows the trust and confidence of authors in Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences.⁶ In some cases we even request our reviewers or editorial team to re-write some of the manuscripts to improve the English language and grammar if there is enough substance in the manuscript and it is clear what the authors wish to convey. Processing of such manuscripts naturally takes a much longer and it is always communicated to the authors who are sent the final corrected and edited version for their approval before it is processed further. But there are also some hopeless cases where even the message which the authors wish to convey is not clear. Such hopeless cases cannot be helped and the authors of such manuscripts are naturally disappointed when their papers are rejected.

In case the authors submit more than one manuscript to the same journal simultaneously, they must remember that only one manuscript is usually processed at a time. They should not expect a decision on all their manuscripts after the stipulated time in most cases though exceptions can be there. Hence, it is advisable that the authors just submit one manuscript to one journal at a time. Another cause of delay is the difficulties in peer review faced by the editors. For example if a particular journal receives too

many manuscripts in a particular specialty, it cannot over burden their reviewers by sending them all the manuscripts for review at the same time. These reviewers do an honorary job and most of the good reviewers are too busy and they cannot handle too many manuscripts. Hence the delay. At the same time manuscripts received in the category of brief communications, special communications, case reports and reviews are much less as compared to original articles, hence they may be processed and published early. These are some of the issues which are not known to the authors. Hence repeated reminders and e mails from the authors at times is quite disturbing and frustrating for the Editors who are always faced with a dilemma to maintain quality and also ensure timely publication of the journal.^{1,2,7}

Pakistan Medical Journalists Association (PMJA) now renamed as Pakistan Association of Medical Editors (PAME) has been conducting workshops on scientific writing, peer review and medical editing at various medical institutions all over the country for the last many years.⁸ It has also organized a few workshops on medical editing for the medical editors and some more similar workshops are planned for the future. College of Physicians and Surgeons Pakistan (CPSP) and a few other institutions have also been contributing their share by training the authors by regularly holding workshops and these are also mandatory for the postgraduates before they can sit in the FCPS-II examination. All these interventions have had a positive impact and the situation is gradually changing for the better. The quality of manuscripts being submitted by the authors is now much better as compared to few years ago but still we have a long way to go. CPSP authorities have been often requested to change the format of their workshops on Research Methodology and

Medical Writing, giving less emphasis on statistics and more on medical writing as the doctors cannot become statisticians and epidemiologists. Except a few, not many are interested in this topic which is a bit dry and moreover they will eventually have to seek the help, guidance and assistance of statistician before planning and conducting a study. However, so far, one does not see any meaningful and positive change in the format of workshops conducted by the CPSP.

In case the authors read, try to understand and religiously follow the instructions to authors, concentrate on original research work which does add something new to the medical literature, they will not only be helping the editors but it will also accelerate the peer review process and reduce the time from submission to actual publication of their manuscripts making this publication game a win win situation for both the Editor and the authors.

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