

## LESSONS LEARNT AT EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN MEDICAL JOURNALS CONFERENCE (EMMJ4) AT BAHRAIN

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Ever since the formation of Eastern Mediterranean Association of Medical Editors (EMAME) in 2003, it has been meeting approximately every two years. The Founding meeting in Cairo was followed by a meeting in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in 2004, the third meeting was held at Shiraz University of Medical Sciences in Iran in 2006 while the fourth meeting held at Manama Bahrain from November 5-7<sup>th</sup> 2008 has just concluded. Held under the auspices of WHO EMRO these conferences have provided an excellent opportunity for international networking and increased regional cooperation to the medical editors of biomedical journals published from the EMRO region. Scientific programme at these conferences consisting of invited guest lectures, plenary presentations besides workshops has also provided a unique opportunity to the participants to learn about peer review, publication ethics, how to tackle problems of duplicate publication and plagiarism besides providing an opportunity to learn medical editing and training of editors.

The conference at Bahrain had presentations in the morning followed by workshops on different subjects in the afternoon which were quite informative and interesting. Listening to renowned medical journalists and editors like Tim Albert from UK, Ana Marusic from Croatia was indeed fascinating and it had

certainly enhanced the quality of the conference deliberations. It offered lot of lessons to those who were keen to learn.

To begin with, the first Keynote Lecture by Tim Albert had many pearls of wisdom for the editors. He made it loud and clear to the Editors that “they should “*forget about the big boys*” in the field. They must try to improve the standard of their journals through a carefully thought out plan which is feasible, practical and do able keeping in view their resources and expertise. The key message in his presentation was that the Editors are the guarantor of content, they should not betray their readers. They must have a vision and make decisions to achieve that vision. The Editors must resist the various pressure groups like pharmaceutical companies, patient pressure groups, governments, Cochrane Collaboration but the worst of all the pressure groups are the authors as their priorities are to improve their CV and apply for research funding. Scientific publications, he opined, serve the needs of their authors above the needs of their readers and these publications are there to be cited and not read. He further emphasized that Editors must not knowingly publish untruth. Decision making is easier if the journals have a vision. A good decision is the one which enhances the journal’s vision but the bad decision is one that gets in its way. The Editors have to be brave and expect or even welcome criticism. Set out some objectives to be achieved and then these should be reviewed every year.”

Most of the biomedical journals published from Islamic Republic of Iran are funded and patronized by various universities of medical sciences which are provided adequate fund-

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ing by Government of Iran. Dr. Ali Akbari Sari Director, Ministry of Health based Commission for Accreditation and Improvement of Iranian Medical Journals highlighted various steps which the Government of Iran is taking to help improve the quality and standard of medical journals including providing them different software's, helping them indexed in various international databases. Dr. M.B.Rokni from Tehran University of Medical Sciences (TUMS) pointed out how they have helped various TUMS journals to improve their indexation in Medline and SCIE, ISI. Prof. Farhad Handjani referred to lack of professionalism in medical journalism and the need to promote this specialty while Dr. Maqbool Jafary from Pakistan came up with a concept of Certificate Course in Medical Editing for discussion and debate before it can be implemented.

Advantages of online publishing like gain in authors and attracting more readers, improvement in visibility of the journals were highlighted by Ana Marusic. Perhaps the most important call came from Jane Nicholson Editor Eastern Mediterranean Medical Journal from WHO EMRO who has been playing a key role in EMAME ever since its inception that "instead of looking towards WHO, the Editors should go back and do something to improve their journals". The same theme was again re-emphasized when Tim Albert in one of his presentations asked that Medical Editors attending the conference must write down ten action points from the conference and make a plan to implement them. These messages need to be propagated as widely as possible and one of the effective ways is that the editors attending these conferences should publish the proceedings and opinions in their own journals in subsequent issues. In addition the networking so gained through these conferences should translate into increased and productive co-operation of the editors in the region.

However, in spite of all this the good quality of manuscripts accepted for publication by the journals remains of vital importance to enhance their standard. Hence, this calls for training of the author's right from the beginning by

including Medical Writing in the undergraduate medical curriculum and also a formal training programme for the editors as being planned by WHO EMRO through designing of Editor's training manual. Reviewer's role is also important as their opinion could help in making the final decision but the Editors are advised not to consider them as final authority to accept or reject a manuscript. While the editors should be tough and strict while reviewing papers but they must be kind while writing the rejection letters.<sup>1</sup> Editors have to work under lot of stress and strains and editing a peer reviewed biomedical journals from the developing country with financial constraints is quite an uphill task.<sup>2-4</sup> Their decisions may annoy many but they must remember that "The only people who love Editors are their wives, husbands, children and parents".<sup>1</sup>

Having a Mission statement of the journal is essential. It should be such that it can be summarized in just one or two sentences.<sup>1</sup> The mission statement of Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences is "To help improve medical care by educating the healthcare professionals through publication of original research and opinions."

One of the major problems faced by most of the medical journals in EMRO region is lack of finances and trained human resources.<sup>2</sup> In the absence of any government support, they will have to think of generating revenues through different ways and one of them could be author fees or publication charges though not all the authors will pay as there are certain waivers. Since a vast majority of the manuscripts received by a few reputed journals in Pakistan practicing peer review are often rejected, their processing does involve lot of expenditures. That is why some of them have started asking for non-refundable processing fee as well.

Author fees vary in different countries depending upon the quality and standard of the journals. For example PLOS Medicine charges authors US\$ 2,750/-.<sup>5</sup> Cost of editing one article at Annals of Internal Medicine is US\$ 13,00/-.<sup>6</sup> PLOS One charges US\$ 1,250/- but it does not do copy editing. It is the responsibility of the authors who must get their

manuscripts copy edited to suite PLOS standard which may cost between US\$ 250/- to 350/-.<sup>5</sup>

Online only publications can reduce the cost significantly but printed copy of the journal is still preferred by many and it will retain its importance in the less developed countries for a long time to come. Switching over to Electronic Long Printed Short (ELPS) version also demands more funds and human resources; hence both these options are not yet viable for many biomedical journals in this region at least for the time being.

Going online does offer numerous advantages but only a very few High Impact Factor journals can think of attracting enough online advertising to be a source of revenue. In case of most of the over 90% of biomedical journals, online will just help them increase their authors, readers and visibility. It will never become a source of revenue for them.<sup>5</sup>

Coming to the situation in Pakistan, one wishes that some representative of Federal Health Ministry or Pakistan Medical and Dental Council should have attended these conferences. PM&DC has a Journals Committee as well. It would have offered them an opportunity to update themselves on different aspects of biomedical journal publication so that they could extend some help and assistance to the Pakistan biomedical journals. But for reasons best known to the authorities it never happens perhaps because they do not realize its importance. On the contrary they do wish to register the journals and also demand exorbi-

tant fees for that instead of offering some financial assistance. On the other hand Higher Education Commission has been very helpful. It has a credible criteria for recognition of medical journals and those recognized are also provided financial assistance. It has been providing financial grants to over half a dozen medical journals in Pakistan for the last few years which is indeed a welcome step in the right direction.

In Pakistan like many other developing countries medical journalism remains a neglected field. All concerned must realize that Medical Journalism has its knowledge base and best evidence. One can use this non-scientific specialty which will be rewarding not only for the Editors themselves but also for their readers.<sup>1</sup>

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