

Medical Editing and Journals in a Time of Change

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It is not known how many medical journals are being published around the world, but their importance within the development and practice of medicine cannot be underestimated. In addition to publishing pure original research, they also provide an important service by collating and analysing research through reviews, and commenting on new developments through opinion and news articles. The crucial role in determining what is published within each journal falls to the editor, whose job is not merely to accept or reject papers, but to determine what type of content appears within the journal and ensure that the journal provides an efficient conduit for information between researchers.

Setting the strategy

Journal editors have a responsibility to ensure that the journal content meets its strategy aspirations. This includes the type of content and the way in which it is presented. For example an editor may decide that the role of their journal is to represent the science of their region, or even of their research institution. They need to establish exactly who the journal is to serve, and how. For example they may decide that the mission of the journal is to provide hospital managers with information to help make financially-efficient decisions in regard to protocols supported at the hospital. This then determines what content they want authors to submit, and what papers they will accept. The mission of the journal also determines what type of content they will include - review papers, original research, news, opinions, etc.

An editor does not work in isolation, and usually works closely with an editorial board. Their job is to support and advise the editor in decisions regarding the journal strategy in addition to the selection of individual papers. One problem that many journals encounter is that the editor has a clear strategy in his or her head, but unfortunately this is not communicated (or agreed) with the editorial board. Without realising that the other is working to a different mandate, the approach to accepting content becomes less clear and frequently results in journals that have mixed content that does not clearly establish them within a particular niche. To complicate this further, editors frequently have to report to, or liaise closely with, an affiliated association or publisher. Potentially this can cause some conflict as the editor may feel compromised in their decisions regarding the content strategy. For example the owning association may wish the journal to represent the views and research of their membership, but the editor could feel that this is too restrictive,

and that they want the journal to represent a larger (or smaller) section of research. Sometimes the owner of a journal is a commercial publisher, and their judgments regarding the strategy may be based on the financial success of the journal - so that they want the editor to include content that will attract commercial sale (for example to the pharmaceutical industry). Both viewpoints of the editor and the owning publisher (or association) are equally valid, but there needs to be agreement so that the editor can implement a strategy that ensures that the journal has a clear focus - and that this is communicated to its readers and authors.

Changing environment

The journal environment is changing rapidly due to several causes. Primarily the introduction of online publishing in the mid 1990s has dramatically changed how researchers access and use published information, and this must inevitably change the role of both the medical journals and the editors that manage them.

The introduction of online publishing was grasped quickly by the research publishing industry and it remains at the forefront on online publishing. At first online journals were simply facsimiles of the printed journal, but there has been increasing innovation to include additional material and to present online information in a more open environment - making research more available than ever before. In effect, the online journal has become an entity separate from the print journal, and many journal editors are now required to plan and manage two publications - the print and the online journal. In print, editors need to restrict the number of pages (and articles) and the type of content - for example they cannot print large data sets, or cannot always include colour images. The online journal has the capacity to take additional material, longer papers, and to include additional material such as data sets. It can also include additional media, such as video clips and 3D images. However the print journal may include content that the editor (or publisher) feel is not suitable or worthwhile including online - for example notices of events, or adverts. This provides an additional responsibility for the editor - to decide what content to accept, and which parts should appear in which medium. An article may have colour photographs which are only printed in black-and-white but provided in colour online; perhaps an article is accepted which includes additional material that is not printed, but provided online in the form of appendices. This potentially changes the focus of the journal, and

could lead to a split where different audiences are served in the print and online versions. An example of this is the South African Family Practice journal (www.safpj.co.za) which publishes full text original research articles online (aimed at specialists and researchers), but the print version (aimed at general practitioners) only provides the abstracts of these articles, plus news, reviews, opinion pieces, etc.

A responsibility to authors

Authors need to publish, both to meet career requirements, and also to ensure that the core of research information continues to grow. When selecting a journal in which to submit their articles they need to have clear guidance regarding the journal content and suitability. This is frequently an area where journals fail their authors, providing incomplete author guidelines, and - more importantly - unclear aims and scope for the journal itself. Authors are not themselves blameless, and all too often submit to an inappropriate journal, and do not bother to adhere to the guidelines set. Online article submission has changed and improved article submission processes greatly, and is now being incorporated by many journals. Although it places more responsibility on the part of the author, it also provides them with a far greater efficiency during the review process. Authors can use the online system to check the status of their paper, and to resubmit where required, and to include additional materials if they would benefit the article.

In research done by the publisher Elsevier, it has been found that authors value refereeing speed as the most important inducement to submit. This is closely followed by the quality of reviewing, and the reputation of the journal. It is therefore important for a journal to provide good services if it wants to attract the best authors and the best papers.

A responsibility to readers

The purpose of a journal is to act as a conduit for the communication of research, and all too often a brick wall is placed between the flow of information – either through poor expression of research findings, or through poor publication.

Poor communication is a problem that editors need to tackle by ensuring that they only accept articles which clearly communicate their information. This involves not only identifying good papers (even when they have poor language), but helping the author to express themselves with more clarity.

In addition to working with authors, they must ensure that the journal itself does not prevent people from understanding its content. This is facilitated by clear, easy navigation around the contents of a journal – for example, clear headings, contents lists, etc. It may also be helpful to segment the content into relevant sections, and identify key papers within an issue. Edi-

torial comments, or perhaps "pick of this issue" in the journal help readers to rapidly identify content that is of interest to them – and when they get to the content, easy navigation around the article, and quick understanding of its content is vital.

A responsibility to the public

Finally, a journal editor has a responsibility to the public through their actions and the type of material that they publish. In the field of medicine this is particularly important, since their publication can affect the treatment of patients. They need to ensure (as far as possible) that their content adheres to good ethical guidelines – that it is not biased or incorrect, and that it has not infringed the rights of patients, etc. They also need to provide readers with information about the source of the information – in particular ensuring that authors state if they have any conflict of interest (for example working for the pharmaceutical company providing the medication their article reviews).

The pharmaceutical industry sometimes supports the writing of science articles by funding professional authors to prepare papers on behalf of busy researchers. In many (if not most) cases, this is benign, and provides papers of high quality for publication. However if the reader does not know that the paper has been written by a medical communication company, funded by a pharmaceutical company, they will not be able to judge the impartiality of the presented findings. (Although it should be noted that authors have to read and approve the final articles before they are submitted for publication.) Therefore several editorial groups have produced good practice guidelines for the assignment of authorship – see for example the "Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals: Writing and Editing for Biomedical Publication" which were established in 1978 and are considered the definitive guidelines for good authorship (www.icmje.org/).

The future for medical editors

To successfully lead a journal, an editor must possess a number of skills. Primarily they must be a leader in their field and know the subject area in which their journal publishes. However this is only part of their responsibility, and without other skills they would not make their journal a success. They must also be able to edit articles and make tough decisions regarding inclusion of content. They need managerial and administrative skills – to make decisions, chair meetings, publicise their journal, deal with staff, etc. Finally, they must have the vision to set a strategy for their journal, and clearly communicate this to their team of editors.

The introduction of new formats (online publishing) has brought an additional level of complexity for editors and requires them to think of different means of communication with their target readership. The

greater reach of online publishing leads to a greater network of readers and authors, and so the editor must think of different communities as they devise the journal strategy and make decisions with regard to its content. It is an exciting time to edit a medical journal – but it is likely that the work required will become increasingly complex and demanding.

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