

Role of the Editors in Improving Quality of Medical Journals

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In a recent Journal Citation Reports (JCR) by Thomson Reuters only two Pakistani journals from clinical sciences were awarded impact factor.¹ The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC) in an updated list of medical journals, placed two journals in W category and two in X category while most are assigned Y category. There is a long list of medical journals that are kept at lowest rating, the Z category. This is an alarming trend. With presence of large number of medical universities and colleges quality research is still non-existent. The reasons behind this status are well known but nothing concrete has been done to address them. A factor not much appreciated is the role of editors of medical journals in the promotion of research.

Editors play a key role in publication of articles.² They have to be extra careful in fulfilling their responsibility because by publishing low quality articles they encourage the faculty members not to pursue the hard course of conducting truly scientific research. Similarly the selection boards at various medical colleges and universities fall short of recognizing worth of published articles. They are only interested in number of publications. HEC and Pakistan Medical & Dental Council are also part and parcel of this nexus. The credibility of Journals Recognition Committees is questioned at many forums. The selection criteria of these committees is largely not known though recently HEC has announced a new induction to this committee including representatives of impact factor journals and representative of Pakistan Association of Medical Editors (PAME).

PAME is the representative body of editors of medical journals recognized by different international associations of medical editors. One of the most important tasks of PAME is to encourage a culture of research, though it does not appear to be its major objective. However PAME has two fold interest behind this activity. Firstly the visibility of Pakistani journals can increase by publication of high quality research and secondly researchers are facilitated in art and science of evidence based medicine, by teaching them as how to conduct research and publish scientific data. PAME has conducted many seminars and workshops on medical writing for students, residents and faculty members in various cities of Pakistan and has also organized international conferences to promote international collaboration. These conferences provided opportunity to editors of Pakistani medical journals to interact with editors of world renowned medical journals, publishers and officials of World Health

Organization.

It has been increasingly realized that editors of the medical journals also need training. A recent surge is noted in number of medical journals in Pakistan. These journals have no defined goals, policy and direction. Many medical colleges and universities started bringing out their own journals that raises issue of conflict of interest. The criteria for selection of editorial board is not available. PAME though a voluntary association, decided to train editors of medical journals in the art and science of medical writing and editing. In this regard a course has been conducted recently in Karachi.³

Editors must be taught how to handle the responsibilities assigned to them. They must be well versed with editorial processes. The chief editor (who must be an academican of good standing and integrity) and managing editors must be aware of publication policies and should up date themselves as to the contemporary practices in the field of medical editing. The academic qualification of editors should be such that they could evaluate the worth of scientific papers submitted for publication.

It is worth developing syllabus for formal training of the editors. The syllabus for training must include topics like the process of initial assessment of articles, categorization of articles, selection of and communication with reviewers, how to provide feedback to the reviewers so as to improve quality of review. Editors must be well versed with study designs and basic biomedical statistics. Both should be part of training course. A session must be kept on publication ethics. This is the most neglected part of medical editing.

Publication ethics include issues related to authorship criteria, conflict of/competing interest, Institutional and Ethic review committee approval, plagiarism, duplicate submission, falsification and fabrication of data, salami slice, etc. Another area that needs attention while teaching and training editors is how to ensure transparency in handling/processing of manuscripts. An explicit conflict resolution policy must be devised by the editors of each journal. It is pertinent at this point to address issues related to loyalties of members of the editorial board and their family members. An up front declaration must be made available where any conflict of interest of members of the editorial board with high ups of the universities, pharmaceutical industry, various professional associations, sponsoring agencies, etc. is revealed.^{4,5}

A striking deficiency noted while evaluating medical journals from Pakistan is lack of adherence to format

of a particular journal and weakness in editing text. Availability of language editor is thus mandatory if editorial board members themselves could not address the task. Bibliography is another area that needs attention and availability or contract with an expert in the field is mandatory. Expertise in handling and accessing electronic communication and computer literacy are desirable.

An issue of remuneration to members of editorial board has been debated frequently. Though most accept the position on honorary basis but there have been concerns as to how this can be sustained. In this materialistic world, how can one acquire expertise of a skilled person without any reimbursement? This may compromise their interest and quality of services rendered to the journal. The accountability procedure, in case a situation arises where members of the editorial boards are involved, may be affected when person renders services on honorary basis. It is therefore suggested that an honorarium must be paid to members of editorial board.

Quality of medical journal is an issue that must be addressed on war footing. A consolidated approach is needed. Formal training of editors and introduction of certificate courses in medical editing can go a long way in achieving the target. Such courses are available in many countries and guidelines can be taken from them.⁶ Medical universities can play an active role in this regard while PAME as a stake holder, is always ready to collaborate.

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