

MEDICAL JOURNALISM IN PAKISTAN: WHERE DO WE STAND?

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In this era of advanced print and electronic media, internet and mass communication, the modern concept of Medical Journalism is not restricted to medical journals only and it involves the dissemination of health-related information through all mainstream media outlets¹. However since the late 18th and early 19th century, the start of medical journals as specialized form of publications which was much different from the communication media of that time was a real landmark in medical journalism². With ages, these journals like medical schools and societies, had a great influence on medical profession and community³. Medical journals are usually professional and scholarly oriented, with scientific and academic contribution from medical researchers. Unlike the ordinary newspapers, medical journals often target the readership of medical professionals instead of general public. In this editorial we will focus on various issues related to medical journals under the umbrella of medical journalism.

The Lancet, the pioneer of medical journalism, was first published on October 5th, 1823 by Thomas Wakley (1795–1862). The Lancet, still published weekly, was followed by numerous medical journals published from all over the world. British Medical Journal (BMJ) was initially launched in October 1840 as Provincial Medical and Surgical Journal. Transaction of the Medical and physical society of Calcutta was the 1st Indian medical journal published in 1825. In 1859, Indian Lancet (1859-60) was published from Lahore⁴. The 1st Pakistani medical journal was Journal of the Pakistan Medical Association, started its publication in 1951, changed its name in 1974 and still it is being published as Journal of Pakistan Medical Association (JPMA). Like any other country the number of medical journals is increasing day by day in Pakistan and there are 67 Pakistani medical journals available on the website of Pakmedinet⁵. Not all of these journals are able to maintain regularity in their publications and some of these are now inactive for quite some times. This fact was very nicely elaborated by Samuel D. Gross as, “some fall stillborn from the press, many die in thier infancy, a few attain to a vigorous manhood, and now and then, one is fortunate enough to reach old age”⁶. Although Gross SD was speaking for books but the same may be applied to the journals of any developing country like Pakistan.

Although cursing the increasing number of medical journals is controversial and debatable, the poor quality of these journals is always a major concern. Out of 67 Pakistani Medical journals, only three journals i.e. JPMA, Journal of College of Physicians and Surgeons Pakistan (JCPSP) and Journal of Ayub Medical College Abbottabad (JAMC) are indexed with MEDLINE (Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online). Worldwide about 5,000 journals are indexed and included in the MEDLINE database and the decision whether or not to index a journal in MEDLINE is based on considerations of both scientific policy and scientific quality⁷. Only two Pakistani medical journals, JCPSP and Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences (PJMS), could recently get an impact factor for the year 2008. The impact factor which was introduced by Dr. Garfield, is a measure of the frequency with which the average article in a journal has been cited in a particular year or period⁸. Impact factor is an important evaluation tool for scholarly journals, issued by Thomson Reuters, previously known as the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) and published in the Journal Citation Report (JCR) covering over 7,350 leading science journals⁹. Although Impact Factor is a controversial tool to measure the quality of articles but there is no alternative available and it being already in use is better option for scientific evaluation¹⁰.

There are many reasons for the poor academic quality of medical journals of Pakistan. Majority of the journals do not have any specific mission statement or editorial policy. A journal cannot survive

without having a solid reason for its existence and must have an appealing motive for the others to support it¹¹. It is primarily the responsibility of the editor to target his readers and then take measures accordingly to attract his readers and also to monitor the readers response as well.

There is no doubt that editing a journal in developing countries like Pakistan is a stressful and rather a frustrating job¹². Bringing out a new journal, attracting good authors for articles submission in an unindexed journal, searching for expert peer-reviewers, publishing and circulating journal, indexing and maintaining high quality of the journal is indeed a herculean job for every editor. The problems faced by the editors in Pakistan are many more than expected and have been highlighted at several occasions¹²⁻¹⁶. Here is a brief account of these problems faced by editors of medical journals in Pakistan.

The main problem faced by the editors is the poor quality of articles submitted and low frequency of standard articles. The major bulk of articles are poorly written, having no or inappropriate study designs, lacking relevant statistics and poor reference citations. Majority of authors in Pakistan are not the full time researchers and many of them are writing the articles for the sake of departmental promotion or to fulfill a requirement of their postgraduate training. There is no proper training of authors regarding medical writing. The authors usually fail to comply with Instructions to authors of the concerned journal. Majority of authors do not qualify as author as per the authorship criteria laid down by International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), leading to the menace of gift authorship and ghost authorship. The publication lag (time between acceptance of a manuscript and publication in a journal) of journals may lead to unrest among authors who are in the dire need of urgent publications. This causes an increase in the rate of duplicate publication or salami slicing, a major headache for the editors. The issues of falsification of reports, fabrications of the results and plagiarism are not uncommon in Pakistan and despite signing the declarations required by various journals, many authors are involved in such types of academic dishonesty.

Another big issue for editors is searching for appropriate and expert peer reviewers. Reviewers are generally not trained and do not know the basics of peer review process. It is also difficult to find reviewers in various subspecialties of medicine and surgery. In Pakistan, peer review is done on honorary basis. Only a few journals are able to pay some remuneration to the reviewers and the rest may only acknowledge the names of reviewers or sending them complimentary copies. Many reviewers are not following the time schedule and need repeated reminders before returning the manuscript. Overall peer review process in Pakistan is slow, substandard, expensive and at times biased and over or under critical as well.

One major issue is the lack of professionalism in medical journalism. The editors of medical journals are usually nonprofessional and inexperienced. The chief editor is usually the head of the institution or the society owning the journal. Sometimes the members of editorial board are elected, giving way to untrained and nonprofessional editors. Members of editorial board are usually inactive and ceremonial. This is not unusual that despite of having a large editorial board with shining big names, the running affairs of the journal is basically a one man show. Most of the editors are working part time and unpaid for their hard work. Many editors are working under miserable conditions, lacking basic logistic support, having no dedicated office for the journal and working without full time assistant. Lack of funding from institutions like PMDC and financial constraints are forcing editors to charge publication fee from the authors.

The problems faced by medical journalism in Pakistan are mainly due to lack of proper training for authors, reviewers, editors, and office staff. There is strong need of regular workshops, courses and training for editors and reviewers along with regular meetings, seminars, symposia and hands on training workshops on research methodology, medical statistics and medical writings for the authors. Some efforts are being made by Pakistan Medical Journalists Association (PMJA), Pakistan Association of Medical Editors (PAME) and College of Physicians and Surgeons Pakistan in this regard. The formation of Eastern Mediterranean Association of Medical Editors (EMAME) in 2003 was a great step in promoting medical journalism in the Eastern Mediterranean region. The founding meeting of EMAME in Cairo was followed by regular meetings in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (2004), Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Iran (2006) and in Manama Bahrain (2008). The 5th regional conference of EMAME on medical journals (EMMJ-5) is being held in December 2010 at Karachi Pakistan, in collaboration with Pakistan Association of Medical Editors (PAME) with the main theme 'Medical Journalism: Opportunities and Challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.' We hope that EMMJ5 will be a great opportunity for all of us to understand the problems faced by medical journalism in Pakistan and to make a strategic plan to meet the challenges in future.

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