



An urgent need to strengthen medical journals in South Asia

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SOAPBOX

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Abstract

Medical journals published in South Asia and other developing regions encounter many challenges. Often authors do not perceive that they have received a fair deal from the journals. In this article the author puts forward a few suggestions to strengthen medical journals in South Asia and also other developing regions.

Key Words

Authors; developing countries; medical journals; South Asia

South Asia has a large proportion of the world's population and medical schools. India has approximately 320 medical schools, Pakistan 73, Bangladesh 45, Nepal 19 and Sri Lanka has 8 medical schools according to data available in November 2011 from the websites of each country's regulatory agencies. This gives a total of 455 to 460 schools in the region. A number of medical journals are published from South Asia and research from this region is steadily increasing. South Asian medical journals can be divided into 'The good, the bad and the ugly'. Some journals are of excellent standards and publish good quality articles. In a previous issue of the *Australasian Medical Journal* (AMJ) I and other authors had written that not only authors but also medical journals have an obligation to follow 'uniform requirements'.¹ In this article I put forward suggestions to strengthen medical journals especially in South Asia. Many other developing regions have similar problems and challenges.

Journals in this region continue to be plagued by a number of problems. The problem I feel is many journals are the personal initiative of a small number of interested and committed individuals. Many of these individuals struggle against overwhelming odds and their initiatives have to be appreciated. Quality issues, however, remain and have to be considered. Certain journals have problems in regular and timely publication of their issues.

The authors' perspective: Many authors have bitter and sad experiences with journals and the publishing process. Many manuscripts submitted over two years back to certain journals are still pending without a decision. In many cases the receipt of the manuscript has not been acknowledged despite repeated reminders by the authors. Many institutions and universities in this region have made a certain number of research papers mandatory for academic promotions. This had led to pressure being applied on journal editors for quick publication of articles and for a favourable review process. Factors other than the standard and integrity of the work and the manuscript could play a role in the final decision. Certain journals have started charging for publication and in South Asia, the problem remains: how do you take money from individuals and ensure fairness and objectivity of the review and publication process? In this region often persons paying money expect preferential treatment. How can the situation be improved and review and publication be made quicker while at the same time ensuring good quality?

Editorial independence: I feel journals should have an independent source of funding. These funding sources could be from trusts, endowments, associations or other sources. An association of medical and other professional schools could also fund a journal. An example is the journal, *Academic Medicine* funded by the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC). Funding from associations and endowments can create problems for editorial independence and mechanisms for the same may have to be developed. At present journals are published by colleges and associations which is a good thing but how do you ensure editorial independence and



the freedom to publish good quality research without external pressures? How do authors know which journals are of good quality and undertake a fair and quick review process? The problem is that there are few indicators to assess quality of a medical journal and in most cases authors are unaware of them. I am not sure if indexing bodies like PubMed, Scopus and others ensure a particular journal is author friendly. The criteria for inclusion of a journal in the Medline indexing system are scope and coverage, quality of content, quality of editorial work, production quality, audience, types of content and geographic coverage.¹ Criteria like how quickly a journal responds to queries from authors, whether and how they acknowledge receipt of submissions and the quality and speed of the peer review and publishing process can also be considered while selecting journals for indexing. The ease and quality of the publication process for authors varies among different indexed journals.

A body to oversee quality of the review and publication process: I strongly feel an independent body to oversee the fairness, quality and timeliness of the review and publication process is recommended. In a previous article we had mentioned time frames for different phases of the review process which I feel will be fair and reasonable for both the authors and the journals.² The total review and publication process should not take more than six months. At present most journals do not offer authors any mechanism for redressing their grievances and there is no independent agency to arbitrate in cases of disputes. To whom do authors complain in case their manuscripts are tied up with the journals for months together? One option for authors is to withdraw their manuscripts in cases of inordinate delay but in certain cases journals do not respond even to requests for withdrawal or do so very sluggishly. Also authors may be worried that withdrawing a manuscript can harm their future relationship with the journal and chances of publication. Also by the time the author/s decide to withdraw their manuscripts valuable time has already been lost as no authors would consider withdrawal until a certain time period has elapsed; or if they feel their manuscripts have been rejected unfairly. Journals of the BiomedCentral group (www.biomedcentral.com) have a section where you can browse the pre-publication history of the manuscript. The reviewers' comments, authors' responses and reasons for the final decision should all be presented in a particular section of the published manuscript.

Speeding up the review process: Lack of timely review is cited as the most common reason for delay in the publication process. I feel journals should follow an open peer review process and the date the manuscript was sent to the reviewer along with the date the review was completed should be

displayed. Or at the end of the calendar year, the names of reviewers along with their mean review time should be published. However, the downside of this is certain reviewers may be upset about this public information and their support for future manuscript reviews may be absent. The issue needs extensive debate. In many cases publishing houses make money from their journals and many big houses are multimillion dollar enterprises. In fact the author and the reviewer are often the only ones who do not make any money from the articles and their efforts. Can reviewers be paid an honorarium in case they do a timely and efficient job? Many journals do not charge authors for publication and do not have other sources of funding. They will find it difficult to pay reviewers. If only certain journals pay reviewers then the journals not paying a honorarium will find it difficult to get their manuscripts reviewed. Journals of the WebmedCentral group (www.webmedcentral.com) allow a review to be counted as a publication providing an academic recognition of the review process. Reviewers and editors should be provided with some form of recognition for the work they do. One method could be creating a system where reviewing a certain number of articles for a journal can be considered equivalent to a scientific publication or being the editor of a journal for a year could be considered equal to a certain number of publications.

Publication after acceptance: The long lag period between acceptance and eventual publication is another problem area. Journals of the BiomedCentral group publish articles immediately on acceptance. Many other journals are beginning to adopt an online first or online early feature where articles are published online before their appearance in print. This is mainly applicable to journals where there is a long waiting period for print publication and at present is not relevant to journals like the AMJ which is published monthly and most accepted articles are published in the coming month's issue.

Comments from readers: Certain journals allow readers to post comments on and even review articles published. This can further improve article quality. WebmedCentral follows a post publication peer review process. The problem is ensuring the quality of articles published. They are now working on WebmedCentral Plus where articles will be initially screened by faculty members belonging to the relevant subject area. Article statistics like number of times it has been accessed and number of times downloaded is also available. According to the editor, the AMJ also accepts letters to the editor in a similar fashion in response to published articles and readers can take



advantage of this feature to further improve the quality of published articles and of the journal.

Medical journals especially in South Asia and certain other developing regions have been sadly neglected. All concerned parties should get together and ensure a fair deal for authors, reviewers and readers of journals. Medical journals in other parts of Asia and in Africa also have problems according to my personal experiences and experiences of other authors. Experiences of editors, reviewers and authors from developed nations which overall have comparatively quicker, fairer and more efficient publishing platforms is invited and will be useful in improving journals in the developing world. This issue has not been scientifically studied to the best of my knowledge and objective evidence is lacking. Also there are journals which are published from the developed world but the editors and reviewers are predominantly from the developing one. This is the personal experience of the author who has submitted articles to, and has published in journals from, both developed and developing countries. Many other authors with whom I have interacted also hold a similar opinion. Of course this may not be true in all cases and there are developing country journals which have efficient publication processes. The author would like to commend the AMJ (www.amj.net.au) for upholding high publishing standards and ensuring a fair deal to authors. The AMJ acknowledges all submissions immediately using an automated system. The review process is quick and in most cases is completed within a month. The journal quickly responds to queries and doubts from authors and most accepted articles are published in the coming month's issue. Authors are the lifeblood of a journal and should be given a fair deal!

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that he has no competing interests