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An Audit of the Students' Corner of Journal of the Pakistan Medical Association

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Abstract

Objective: To analyze the pattern of the first author's institutional affiliation and the distribution of different article types published in the students' corner of the Journal of Pakistan Medical Association.

Methods: This cross-sectional study was carried out in July 2005 and analyzed the students' corner (whenever present) of the Journal of Pakistan Medical Association from January 1998 to June 2005.

Results: For the 90 issues of the journal in the stipulated period, 96 articles were published in the students' corner. Original studies 46 (47.9%) were the most commonly published article category followed by personal opinion/review category (43.8%) and case-reports 8 (8.3%). The number of personal opinion/review articles has been steadily decreasing. Students from Aga Khan University contributed 74 (77.1%) articles followed by students from Ziauddin Medical University 10 (10.4%). Almost 95% of the authors were from private medical colleges. Sindh was the location of the first authors institution in 90 (93.8%) cases.

Conclusion: A major chunk of all articles published in the students' corner of the Journal of Pakistan Medical Association originates from two private medical colleges in Sindh. Efforts must be made to increase student participation across the country. This may be done by asking students to begin scientific writing by submitting personal opinion articles. Further research is needed to assess the status of student research in terms of published output in Pakistan (JPMA 55:517;2005).

Introduction

Increasing recognition is being given to the need of providing students of health sciences with avenues to share their research work and ideas in mainstream scientific journals. The rationale is to enable students to develop scientific writing skills; familiarize them with evidence-based medicine; provide confidence, motivation and self-esteem associated with a publication; and allow them to share their views with the medical community.¹⁻³ This trend is also a testimony to the vital role that students can play in guiding the future of medical profession.⁴

In the past few years journals like Public Library of Science Medicine, Journal of Postgraduate Medicine, Journal of College of Physicians and Surgeons of Pakistan, Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences and Croatian Medical Journal have introduced student sections. Journal of Pakistan Medical Association (JPMA), the oldest indexed journal of Pakistan, has the distinction of introducing a students' corner back in January 1998. It was launched with the vision: "We want to be heard even as medical students for we have so much to say and share in this day and age. Venturing henceforth from our 'Corner' there is no doubt we can make a difference, however small it may be in the beginning. Let's make it a coming together of research, ideas and experiences."⁵ Since then it has come a long way forward.

The review of past performance of any phenomenon always helps identify its strengths and weaknesses. This in turn helps find fresh strategies and solutions for new problems and also strengthens the general process of development. This also seems true for medical journalism and

development of a research culture in Pakistan. A publication in a high impact factor journal may or may not be a direct determinant of quality research. In the majority of the cases, however, the publication rate in a quality journal may serve as a surrogate marker of the research culture of an institution. For this reason, an analysis of the Students' Corner of JPMA may help us construct a vague picture of the state of student research in Pakistan.

The present study aimed to analyze the pattern of institutional contributions to the student corner and the distribution of different article types published in the corner over time. Based on the findings, suggestions for improvement are made.

Methods

This was an observational study with a cross-sectional design. The issue of January 1998 was identified as the first issue with a student corner. From this issue onwards, the tables of contents were scanned to identify the separate heading of a students' corner. If present, the students' corner articles were analyzed to gather the relevant information as specified below. No attempt was made to identify any student authors in other sections of the journal. All issues from January 1998 to June 2005 were included in the study.

The data collection tool was designed to collect information pertaining to the institutional affiliation of the first author; the province/administrative division in which the first author's institution was located; whether the article was an original study, case report or a personal view/review; and whether a paper had authors from more than one institution. All

reviews, personal opinions, scientific news and any other article which could not be categorized as an original study or a case report were included in the personal view/review category. The data was collected, entered and analyzed in Statistical Package for Social Sciences (Version 10.0.1, copyright SPSS; 1989-99) by the authors. Simple frequency outcomes were obtained for all variables. The trend of the category of articles published with respect to time was also analyzed.

Results

From January 1998 to June 2005, a total of 90 issues of JPMA were published. Of these, 14 issues were without a students' corner while 17 issues had more than one article in the students' corner. In total, there were 96 student authored articles published in the student corners' during the aforementioned period. The category-wise breakdown of articles published is as follows: original studies 46, (47.9%), personal opinion/review category 42, (43.8%) and case-reports 8, (8.3%). Out of the 42 articles in the personal opinion/review category 29 (69.0%) were published in the years 1998 and 1999. The number of this category of articles has been decreasing steadily (Table 1). From the years 2002 to 2004, 9 (25%) of the total 36 issues were without an article in the students' corner (Table 1).

Table 1. Year-wise breakdown of types of articles published in the student corner.

Publication Year	Article Category			Total
	Original Study	Case Report	Opinion/Review	
1998	4	2	17	23
1999	5	-	12	17
2000	5	2	5	12
2001	5	1	5	11
2002	6	-	2	8
2003	9	-	-	9
2004	7	2	1	10
2005*	5	1	-	6
Total	46	8	42	96

* Total issues: six.

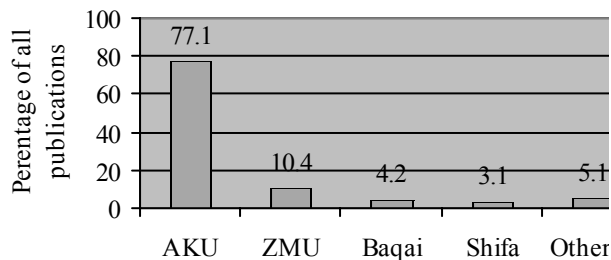


Figure. Institutional affiliation of the first authors as a percentage of all publications.

* Ayub Medical College, Abbottabad; Allama Iqbal Medical College, Lahore; Dow Medical College, Karachi; and school students.

Student authors from Aga Khan University (AKU) contributed to 74 (77.1%) of all articles followed by students from Ziauddin Medical University (ZMU) (Figure 1). Of the 96 articles published, only one each came from Ayub Medical College, Abbottabad; Allama Iqbal Medical College, Lahore; and Dow Medical College, Karachi. Almost 95% of all contributions came from students of private medical colleges. This also, understandably, reflected in the provincial affiliation of the first authors. Authors from Sindh contributed to 90 (93.8%), from Islamabad three (3.1%), from Punjab two (2.1%) and NWFP one (1.0%) of all student articles respectively. Only 8 (8.3%) of papers had contributing authors from more than one institution.

Discussion

The performance of the students' corner in terms of number of contributions has been satisfactory. The number of articles published per year has, however, decreased. This is evident from the following observations. For the years 2002 till 2004, 25% of the issues were without a students' corner. Similarly, there were 23 articles published in 1998 as compared to only 8 in 2002. The latter comparison should be made keeping in mind the fact that in the first two years there was an excessive number of personal view articles which appeared as a regular feature giving information pertaining to scientific news and general tips etcetera. The number of contributions in terms of original studies has moderately increased. While it is encouraging to note this increase, efforts need to be made to encourage students to also write personal views, the numbers of which have drastically declined, in order to groom their writing skills and help gain confidence.

If we look at the author contributions, the bulk of the articles originate from AKU students. This is in cognizance with the fact that AKU is the leading institution in terms of health sciences research in the country. The second leading contributing institution is ZMU. Between them they share 87.5% of all contributions to JPMA. Only one article of all 96 published originated from Dow Medical College, Karachi which is a government sector medical college in Sindh. The virtually non-existent contributions from public medical colleges are a cause for concern. There is dearth of data on specific reasons for this high student productivity from AKU and ZMU in particular. But, a comparative analysis of general characteristics of these two institutions with other medical colleges of Pakistan may portray the following advantages for the medical students of these two institutions: a well-established research infrastructure, awareness of students about the importance and potential benefit of research experience in getting residency positions abroad, the educational emphasis on the practice of evidence-based medicine, introduction of research methodology in the medical curriculum, mandatory academic research projects and appointment of JPMA student editors from

these two institutions. Another added feature of research and related activities at the Aga Khan University is the unique activities of its student research forum. The Aga Khan University Student Research Forum is a student run society which works for research capacity building among medical and nursing students. Other reasons for lack of contribution from other medical colleges apart from the lack of a research culture could be that these students may be publishing in other local journals. It may also be postulated that submissions to the students' corner from these institutions are rejected due to poor quality.

This high contribution rate from these two institutions translates into more than 90% of contributions originating from Sindh. This reflects on the limited scope and impact of the students' corner as a nationally representative publication. A similar trend pertaining to all publications, with most contributions originating from major cities, is also observed in other local journals as well.⁶ This lack of contributions from non-private medical colleges and institutions outside Sindh needs to be rectified. Although one obvious reason for this lack of contribution may be the absence of a research culture, efforts to counter this trend are needed. To fulfill the original vision of JPMA's students' corner certain suggestions are being given (Table 2). Encouraging letter writing by students will not only promote scholarly participation but also serve to enhance the journal's impact factor. While making these recommendations, we are cognizant of the fact that research awareness is limited and surely these efforts will take time to bear fruit. Without doubt national support in terms of infrastructure, funding and training is an essential pre-requisite for these suggestions to be implemented and made effective.

Table 2. Suggestions for enhancing national participation in the students' corner.

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1. Sending complimentary JPMA copies to medical colleges across the country.
 2. Proper advertisement of the students' corner in medical colleges.
 3. Award for the best students' corner paper of the year.
 4. Appointment of a student editor from other provinces particularly Punjab.
 5. Motivating students of government medical colleges to write in the personal opinion category.
 6. Encouraging students to write letters to the editor and case reports.
 7. Targeting students in manuscript writing workshops.
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The number of articles with authors from more than one institution was less than 10%. Expecting student papers to be of multi-author affiliations might be premature but collaborations need to be encouraged. To begin with, students from AKU and ZMU should try to involve other medical colleges in their projects. This will help in serving the cause of research in general and student research in particular.

Irrespective of all these limitations we understand that running a students' corner productively is no easy task and for this JPMA must be commended. This can be judged from the fact that only one article was published during three years in the student corner of Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences.⁷ The latter observation also points to the concerted efforts needed to increase student participation in research. Early student involvement in research will set the grounds for improving the research culture. This will also help realize the original dream of JPMA's students' corner.

This study is not without its limitations. The study has only analyzed one journal out of the more than 35 published in the country. Also, no efforts were made to identify student authors in sections outside the students' corner of the JPMA. These shortcomings may lead to an underestimate of student publications. Nevertheless, this analysis of the oldest indexed journal of the country with a well-established student section serves as a crude marker of quality student research publications. The need to explore the issue of student research further is imperative.

In conclusion, the analysis of the students' corner indirectly points towards the negligible research productivity of public health sector medical students. It shows that provided the right milieu, students can contribute significantly in terms of publications. Efforts need to be made to increase national representation in the students' corner.

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