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Institutionalized Training of Research Editors

Saba Sohail¹ and Jamshed Akhtar²

The last few years have seen launching of many new medical research-publishing journals, the numbers of which are commensurate with the numbers of new medical colleges and universities in the country. This is basically a cause-and-effect phenomenon as the academia is selected and promoted on the basis of published research, thus universities are graded and, therefore, funded on the basis of their research output. So far, it is acceptable; but what is dubious is the quality of the publication, in terms of house style, archival content, quality and diversity. Many editors are not formally trained in the art and science of editorship. In a study published in JAMA, it was reported that most of the editors were academicians and that was their only ability due to which the responsibility of editorship was assigned to them.¹

While the quality and diversity depend quite markedly upon the contributors and their quality of research, all the other factors and partly even the submission quality are affected by the editorial standards. The basic requirements of a general biomedical journal to establish its mark include good quality articles, variety with emphasis on primary and secondary research articles unless dedicated to a specific category of manuscript publishing, consistent and reasonably good looking layout and good publishing practices as well as the whole spectrum of quality, publication ethics, fairness and timely publication. This is, therefore, a multifaceted task and requires dedicated handling by an expert editorial team and support staff.

Editorship of a research journal is now a specialized job. It entails many responsibilities, all of which require an in-depth knowledge of the art of research and publications and its finesse. It implies a whole process of painstaking repeated in-house and external quality and category evaluation; judging the adequacy of review and revision; polite, explicit and timely communication with authors and reviewers; and finally making the article publishable as conformed to the house style. There are so many

things that may go wrong at any step: Authors and/or reviewers may not respond timely, ethical issues arise in the content during and after publication ranging from duplicate or multiple submissions, authorship issues, allegations of data fabrication, falsification and even stealing. House style compliance is a big issue which many authors tend to ignore. Handling of ethical issues is becoming more complex. It requires experience and preferably training to get its complexity and the implications understood. In a study, it was reported that editors' knowledge about many publication related issues were poor.² From Iran, it was reported that most of the editors obtained average knowledge score on medical publication standards.³

There have been considerable advances in the format, processing, printing and archiving of research publications. The mode of submission has changed from typeset hard copy to online submission. Publishing has taken a turn from offset to desktop to online mode. Archiving has become a virtual eternity with html versions and allocation of digital object identifiers. Even the methods adopted for review have undergone myriad innovations. The research editor now has acquired a working knowledge of handling ethical issues, legal liabilities, the copyright and the creative commons licenses, correct utilization of the plagiarism detecting softwares and similarity indices interpretation, the international guidelines regarding research registration and legitimacy, the geopolitical biases and embargos, familiarity with research retraction procedures, authors, and publications, rights and responsibilities, the technicalities of increasing the number of issues in a volume, author payments and reimbursement modes, the existence of article brokers, so on and so forth. All these improvisations, innovations and challenges have made research journal editing and publishing a continuously evolving science often referred to as journalology.

In order to maintain the standard of uptodate credible research publishing, the editors need to be aware of these paradigm shifts. While most of the editors have learned from experience under the aegis of senior mentor editors; in contemporary times, training programs specifically designed towards training in research journal editorships are available. These training programs for research journal editors are available as short, online, even certified short courses, covering various aspects provided by professional bodies such as WAME. However, there are full time dedicated Masters Programs in Medical Journalism in some countries.

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Institutionalized training goes a long way in improving the caliber and output of a professional. With the current increase in the number of medical journals, it is high time that institutionalized training of aspiring editors should be undertaken by a credible training institute. With over 25 years of good and respected publishing practices, College of Physicians & Surgeons Pakistan (CPSP) has the potential to provide this training. A curriculum can be designed and a hybrid type of course with both face-to-face and online components in a modular pattern be developed. A similar effort by Pakistan Association of Medical Editors (PAME) in collaboration with University of Health Sciences, Lahore is in pipeline. CPSP can collaborate in this initiative. Its Journal (JCPSP) is an Impact Factor journal which has many distinctions that makes it a place where hands-on experience can also

be provided to the editorial board members of other journals. This was also deliberated in recent meeting of editorial board of JCPSP. It can be considered as a capacity-building effort towards medical journal editors' training.

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