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## A Medical Editor's Utopia

Saba Sohail

The recently concluded Third Biennial National Conference of the Pakistan Association of Medical Editors (PAME) in April 2016, besides some excellent editorial training workshops and insights, also provided a Hyde-Park-equivalent to the medical editors of the country. There were two particular sessions: one on the role and links with accrediting bodies and the other, an open-house session, during which the specific journal-related problems, faced by the medical editors, were discussed. The representative editors expressed their concerns regarding multiple aspects of running their journal, ranging from reservations with the national research accrediting bodies to problems as encountered during everyday working. The speakers were representatives from nearly every facet of periodical research publications, university journals, independent degree awarding institutes' journals, medical college journals, and professional society / association journals.

The core problems identified with the accrediting bodies were communication issues, and lack of transparent criteria for recognizing and categorizing the research medical journals. Communication from these bodies was generally held to be erratic in terms of timeliness, and expression. The correspondence was not felt to be timely or updated and considered more often a threat of potential de-recognition being conveyed rather than an intimation or updating of changes in policy issue statements. The office-bearers of PAME have often expressed their concerns in the past over such communications, on the general list, served to the PAME members. Another problem felt was the lack of transparent criteria and procedure for recognizing and categorizing the research medical journal with journals of varying standards being placed in the same or different categories. The websites were found lagging behind on information, and short-notice meetings being called up by these bodies demanding attendance with cumbersome hard copy records, despite availability of electronic records, was not considered as being helpful to the cause. Either the national editors did not have any representation in these bodies or a meeting was not

called-for. It is to be regretted that no representative of these august bodies attended the session, despite repeated requests on behalf of the PAME. It might have explained the apparent apathy towards local research journals.

The open-house session had rather a different flavour, rightly summed up as being common problems faced not only on the national but international front. The top-most issue, found to be commonly faced by all the editors, was editorial freedom being jeopardized by pressure groups – authors, editorial board, and administrations alike. Most of the editors in medical university, college or institutional journals are part-time editors; being faculty, given an extra task of running the research journal, some with background editing experience but mostly without. Being part of the faculty, they face pressure from the fellow faculty members or administration authorities to publish their papers even without trying to rectify the shortcomings of the write-up.

Journals publishing from public medical colleges are basically suffering from financial and infrastructural dearth. The research journal is considered a financial drain by the Finance Division and public audit laws preclude financial autonomy. Another ground reality is the editorial team, changing with the changes in the head of the institute who is the *ex-officio* Editor-in-Chief, defying continuity in editorial policies. The secretarial/support staff frequently gets transferred being in public service, thus depriving the journal from trained staff. There is usually no place ownership, with frequent relocation of the journal premises. Similar to the financing problems, the journal is dependent on the IT and librarian support of the institute, for whom research publication is not the priority. These journals often do not have their own website and have to share space with general website of the parent institute. All these factors contribute to breach of confidentiality, lack of long-term continuity of policies, erratic publication frequency, and limited visibility. Association- and society-owned journals face pressure from the office-bearers of the society who have electoral interests.

A very different dilemma was presented by an editor from a public institute who is facing the now ministry-versus-faculty tug-of-war. When old public institutes are renamed, and partly handed over to newly created and renamed universities with old administrative and new academic staff, this creates a very complex working situation, which the medical fraternity is facing in Pakistan for the last decade. The changes desired in the names of journals to align with the new name of the

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institute and yet struggling to maintain the identity of the name and rapport it had acquired over the years; the induction of multiple editors having different-to-no-ideas of journal running and processing, coupled with lack of financial independence, make the dedicated editors' working a real nightmare.

Medical or biomedical research editors in Pakistan are generally not part of a professional publishing corporation. Like everywhere in the world, they have to deal with multiple internal and external working groups, authors, managers, staff and financiers, owners, and keep all of them satisfied,<sup>1</sup> without compromising the merit and integrity of the research they are publishing. Every editor has to consider the financial viability of the journal while keeping the authorship and readership integrated.<sup>2,3</sup> Changes in editorial composition and publication policy happen everywhere and need to be communicated and explained.<sup>4</sup> Even editorial decisions need to be discussed in a systematic way to avoid confusions over policies and final decisions regarding article publication.<sup>4</sup>

However, the overall expressions of the national medical editors can be summed up as demand for respect, editorial freedom in favour of merit and integrity, financial independence, and continuation of policies. This may seem to be a nebulous idea, considering the ground realities and practices at the moment, still there are Pakistani journals working as near as possible to this utopian state, and communication does make a difference.

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