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In Pursuit of Quality Research: Editors' Perspective

Jamshed Akhtar¹ and Saba Sohail²

Medical journals have a long history of existence. They played an important role not only in dissemination of knowledge but also informing the policy-makers; and contributed in improving healthcare of the population.¹ In doing so, they always tried to improve quality of research through editorial processes, as well as by teaching and training potential researchers and reviewers. Today, most of the editors of the medical research journals are not paid for their services and work in an honorary capacity. Though one can find a long list of editorial board members in every journal; but practically speaking, only few are involved in critical decision-making though help of others is often taken when any conflict arises. In most of the cases, there is no formal recognized training of editors; whereas, they learn and grow through the "apprenticeship model". However, more and more workshops and courses are being organized and conducted by professional associations the world over to provide formal training to those who aspire to join an editorial team. In the context of Pakistan, all credit goes to individuals who have preferential interest in contributing to medical journalism, in addition to their primary duty. Most of them got trained via the apprenticeship model, that is learning while working with senior editors, as pointed out earlier. They continue to update themselves by attending educational activities meant for editors. They work hard to maintain standard of medical journals. This resulted in the indexing in renowned databases like Medline and PubMed for a few journals. To date, only three journals are fortunate to receive an Impact Factor, as well.

In this context, the role of the two regulatory and statutory bodies, in terms of registering and assigning various categories to medical journals, remains rather ambiguous and even controversial. Pakistan Medical & Dental Council (PM&DC) was the oldest, and did nothing more than compiling and printing a set of instructions for the authors and editors including a prototype sample of reviewers' guideline in 2004, getting a subscription fee and placing medical journals in a category of being

recognized for the purpose of academic appointments and promotions. PM&DC has entrusted the task of recognition of medical journals to a committee. It is not known as to how the members of this committee are selected and what are their criteria of evaluating medical journals. What is known is a mushroom growth of Pakistani medical research journals, published from all over the country except Balochistan, having gross deficiencies in terms of publications.

Higher Education Commission (HEC) is the other regulatory body that tried to categorize research journals including those from medical and allied fields, when medical universities were established in Pakistan. Surprisingly, it failed to make distinction between human, clinical and basic natural and physical sciences research; and applied the same criteria of recognition to medical research journals as applied to other research journals. Moreover, it made no distinction about the utility of industrial and human-care research, applying the same criteria of commercialism on both. It also failed to appreciate the basic infrastructure in relation to clinical research, which does not exist in Pakistan. It also made the same mistake by selecting experts, who hardly had any background in medical writing and research, as members of its journal evaluating committee. This resulted in assigning "X" category to a number of journals from a select region of Pakistan. In doing so, it violated its own criteria of "X" category. Pakistan Association of Medical Editors (PAME), an official organization of Pakistani medical journal editors, was never taken on board though it is a genuine stake holder in medical journalism. PAME, on many occasions, invited officials of HEC and PM&DC to attend its international-level conferences, but they failed to do so. It is worth mentioning here that HEC does support journals with monetary grants, based upon their category. It also provides the facility of using 'Turnitin' software for similarity checking to few journals. It arranges workshops and seminars in relation to research/ publication and invites medical journal editors; however, its recently conducted workshop in Karachi for medical journal editors failed to achieve any positive result as the meeting was called in haste without any agenda and was facilitated by those who were not experts on the subject. One of them was editor of a non-Impact Factor medical journal and the other researcher had no relevance or practical experience of local medical journal's management and publication. It would be of interest to note that the said meeting was attended by the editors of Impact Factor science journals of

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Pakistan (both medical and non-medical). Both the facilitators were highly critical of the standard of Pakistani research journals, stressing on the need to improve the quality of the research publication to which all agree. However, the policing role adopted by the HEC and the way it was communicated, was controversial and questionable.

It should be understood that Pakistani medical journals are hardly surviving and passing through a very difficult time in this era of economical crises. To publish an issue of journal is an uphill task with limited resources in terms of manpower and monetary crunch. On top of it, the type of research coming from medical universities is too primitive, due to lack of culture of research. The quality of medical journals reflects what is being done at our medical colleges and universities as these institutes are only evaluated on the quantity of research. They cannot be blamed solely for promoting low quality publications, as they are actually publishing the best of what is submitted to them, in most cases after comprehensive editing. In fact, it should be an eye-opener for the policy-makers, regulatory bodies, medical universities, colleges, and examination conducting institutes to embark upon projects that support quality research in the context of Pakistan. It is high time that HEC should revisit its policy of categorizing medical journals. It is suggested that only two categories be made – Impact-Factor and non-Impact-Factor journals. It should be made clear here that all Impact Factor journals, from even the technically advanced countries, do not publish homogeneously high quality articles. In fact, many published researches are flawed because of poor methodology, incorrect statistical analysis, and wrong conclusion.² Thus, being an Impact Factor journal is not synonymous to a good quality content of research.³ There are many ways of inflating Impact Factor, which

many journals practise in order to gain higher ranking. Role of publishers is also important. Giants in publication business from abroad support medical research journals by their vast experience and help in acquiring and inflating the Impact Factor.

HEC, by virtue of its position and mandate, can support Pakistani medical journals by facilitating in the process of getting indexed with international databases. It can enter into memorandum of understanding (MoU) with internationally famed publishers for inclusion of Pakistani journals into their master list. It can assist journals in creating XML and HTML files, which is one of the basic requirements for evaluation of medical journals. This can be done by providing centralized facility of IT experts. By giving monetary support to hire biostatisticians, getting access to plagiarism check software, and acquiring digital object identifier (doi), it will be possible for Pakistani medical journals to become visible on international scenario; and hence, be read and cited. Lastly, publication ethics must not be forgotten. It should be applied to editorial board level, as well. Journal's policies and processing should be available on website so as to ensure transparency. Researchers and contributors should also be made aware of these policies. From PAME platform, all the necessary help is available to educate and train medical journal editors.

We hope for the best in this regard.

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