

Keynote address

Plight of Medical Journalism in Pakistan

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The idea of this first ever conference on Medical Editing in Pakistan was floated by Prof. Major General Mohammad Aslam, Principal of Army Medical College, Rawalpindi. Pakistan Medical Journalists Association (PMJA) decided to extend its whole hearted support. Dr. Maqbool H. Jafary and Mr. Shaukat Ali Jawaid were requested to co-ordinate.

Pakistan Medical Journalists Association was established in 1983 with the objective of promoting the cause of medical journalism in the country. In this connection PMJA has conducted numerous seminars and workshops in collaboration with major institutions of the country. Under its banner, it has published several books on the art of medical writing and medical editing. Our members have also played a significant role in the establishment of Eastern Mediterranean Association of Medical Editors (EMAME) under the umbrella of WHO EMRO. Presently Dr. Maqbool H. Jafary is the Vice President and also the Chairman of the Evidence Based Medicine Committee of EMAME. Mr. Shaukat Ali Jawaid is one of the Presidents-at-large and also Chairman of its Scientific Committee.

The membership of PMJA includes the editors of medical publications in the country, be it the medical newspapers or medical journals. The number of medical journals currently recognized by the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council stands at over forty. These journals are also indexed in WHO EMRO IMEMR Current Contents as well as EMBASE of Netherlands. However, only three are presently indexed in Medline. Only one medical journal is indexed in SCIE by Thomson/ISI.

There is a famous saying that if there are no medical writers, there would be no medical editors. Medical writing and medical editing represent two aspects of the same face. Unfortunately both these fields remain

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neglected in our country. There is no formal coaching and only PMJA and the College of Physicians and Surgeons Pakistan have paid some attention to this problem. We sincerely hope that other medical institutions in the country will contribute their share. Medical writing and medical editing should be introduced as subject in the undergraduate medical curriculum. This is an era of research and those nations that are not inquisitive are wiped out unceremoniously. This point should be earnestly grasped by the Islamic World, most countries of which belong to WHO EMRO region.

Let me quote a few lines from an article published in the prestigious scientific journal NATURE,¹ this article titled “What was wrong with the Muslim Science” Francis Giles writes” At its peak about one thousand years ago, the Muslim World made a remarkable contribution to science, notably Mathematics and Medicine. Baghdad in its heyday and southern Spain built universities to which thousands flocked; rulers surrounded themselves with scientists and artists. A spirit of freedom allowed jews, christians and muslims to work side by side. Today all this is but memory.”

“Publish or Perish” is a well known dictum. In our country very few physicians write for the love of it, mostly do it under duress e.g. writing a dissertation or a thesis for a postgraduate qualification; or to fulfill the requirements for promotion. Unfortunately appointment of medical teachers is also based on other considerations than research and publication. Experience shows that practicing physicians and part-time faculty members cannot devote enough energy for such academic pursuits. Naturally this lack of interest in research and medical writing trickles down to their trainees. Hence appointments of a full time and devoted scientific faculty are imperative for survival in this academic world. With dearth of medical writing it is difficult for the medical journals to survive. Hats off to the editors who still manage to publish their journals against all odds.

In Pakistan the problems besetting the medical journalism are many, the chief ones being the lack of training of editors, lack of coaching of authors in scientific writing, dearth of good quality reviewers and, last but not the least, financial sustainability of the journals. Add to this, plagiarism and other ethical issues. Our editors have also to keep pace with the latest developments in the world e.g. online journalism and e-publishing.

There is a dire need for formal training in medical writing and medical editing. The present conference is an important step in that direction. It will

provide a great opportunity for interactive sessions with the brothers, and I hasten to add the sisters-in-arm from within the country as well as distinguished delegates from WHO and friendly countries. We sincerely hope that the deliberations of this conference will go a long way in guiding the future of Medical Writing and Medical Editing in Pakistan.

References

1. Giles F. What was wrong with the Muslim Science? NATURE, March 24th 1983.