

Duties of an editor difficulties encountered

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The basic duties and responsibilities of an editor of a biomedical journal include the publishing of good and standard articles on original research. The editor has to be extra vigilant so as to identify fraud, plagiarism and duplicate publication. Every article should be initially seen by the editor to review the topic, quality of research, nature of the contents and length of the paper. The necessary documents have to be checked for authenticity and these include, copyright statement, contribution of authors towards the research and undertaking that the article has not been submitted to another journal. This document has to be signed individually by the first author and all co-authors.¹

Further to these duties an editor is responsible for the entire contents of the journal which should be fulfilling the aims of the journal. Selection of good and experienced peer reviewers is an added responsibility as this eventually reflects on the standard of the publication. The editor has the authority to have the last word and take a final decision on accepting or rejecting an article.²

Performing the duties of an editor is not an easy task. Good knowledge, experience and a strong character are the basic requirements. The judgment should be unbiased and honest and there should be a high grade of moral courage to stand pressures from influential people. Confidentiality of information and managing conflicts of interest are important aspects of the character of an editor.

Editors should be capable of taking decisions and adhere to them. If need arises the decision has to be reconsidered. But editorial independence should be maintained and author's freedom ensured. They should know how to deal with allegations and misbehaviour without getting

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provoked. Planning for the future to improve the quality of the journal, which would include the website, paper of the hard copy, language and printing, are major duties of the editor.

Finally there should be no financial or personal relationship linked to the responsibilities as this would not only reflect on the personal character but also place a doubt on the standard of the journal.

The editor has to play the role of a parent. All the team members have to be fostered and encouraged. These include the editorial board members, authors, peer reviewers, financiers, office staff and the printing press.

The duties of an editor are not without difficulties and challenges. Although, the members of the editorial board are selected carefully and are all highly qualified and experienced persons, but on the other hand they are all very busy clinicians. This gives them little time for extra curricular activities especially review work. The result is very little support and the burden of the work falling on a few dedicated members.

Authors are an integral part of the journal. But very often they create problems by writing articles without reading the guidelines and instructions. Most authors do not read sufficient literature so cannot provide valid references.³ Lack of experience in writing and not sufficient help from seniors, makes the article a mixed up manuscript with results being repeated in discussion, incomplete methods, wrong statistical methods applied giving faulty results and a lengthy irrelevant discussion. Often the language, syntax and spellings need extensive corrections. All this can be attributed to the intention to write, which is usually either a necessity for promotion or for a postgraduate examination.

Another serious problem related to authors is revising the article in the light of the reviewer's comments. The permitted time is maximum four weeks. The authors can delay it to around nine months to two years. Technically the long delay makes the study invalid as the references are outdated but the authors insist on a quick publication despite the long delay.

A very difficult situation arises when the peer reviewer does not return the manuscript with comments in the allotted time of four weeks. Repeated reminders may not be successful and the period can extend up to even nine or ten months. The usual reasons are the article being misplaced or shortage of time. At times the reviewer acquires a silent mode and just does not respond. It is disappointing but there is no cure for this ailment. Rarely does a reviewer return the article with a note of regret stating the paucity of time or going away on a trip.

There are many challenges faced by a journal with an important one being finances and raising funds. A small publication fee can be charged which is a minimal contribution. Subscribers are virtually non-existent as there are few readers. Libraries request for complimentary copies and the pharmaceutical industry have their own priorities.

The other challenge is finding good and competent office staff. A computer literate assistant having a good command over the English language can be considered a luxury in these times. Ideally if resources permit every journal should have a paid managing editor.

A good printing press is essential as there are no publishers available easily and they are expensive. Printers can cause delays and at times mistakes made can compromise the quality of the journal.

The Journal of Pakistan Medical Association (JPMA) was founded in 1953 as a quarterly publication. It was converted to a monthly in 1957 and indexed with Index Medicus in 1975. The number of articles being submitted to JPMA has been steadily increasing with 183 in 1991 going up to a figure of 334 in 2006. On the average 60% are original articles, 18% case reports, 10% Review articles and 12% are short reports. The largest contribution of articles is from Karachi (60.5%), with 21% coming from other cities of Pakistan. The foreign contributions amount to 18% and include UK, USA, Turkey, South Africa, Iran, Iraq, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and India.

The Message for all the editors is the saying by Sir Winston Churchill, “Success is the ability to go from one problem to another with no loss of enthusiasm”. Success is also having patience and perseverance which overcomes all difficulties. Success lies in having a strong will power and final success is the ability to resist pressures for early publication of an article despite anticipated serious consequences.

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