

Training of Medical Editors and the role of professional organizations

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Most of the Editors of biomedical journals in developing third world countries including Pakistan have had no formal training in editing but have had on the job training. No facilities for training are available within the country and the courses available overseas are so expensive that most of the editors cannot afford it unless they get some funding or are sponsored which is not readily available. In such circumstances the editors have to look for alternate sources for training. Continuous Professional Development is extremely important for all professionals' medical editors being no exception. Hence, they have to be on the look out for any such opportunities. It is also important that the editors are keen learners and keep themselves abreast of latest developments in the field of medical journalism.

Pakistan Medical Journalists Association (PMJA)

Professional organizations like Pakistan Medical Journalists Association (PMJA) and similar other bodies can also play a vital role in this field. Pakistan Medical Journalists Association has organized workshops on Peer Review in Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad¹⁻² where editors of various biomedical journals were also invited. They were encouraged to share the process of editing and peer review which they practice thereby providing an opportunity to the participants to learn from each other's experience.

There are many other alternate sources which include World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) and Eastern Mediterranean Association of Medical Editors (EMAME). WAME website (WAME.org) has a Syllabus for Prospective and Newly Appointed Editors prepared by Education Committee (Robert D. Utiger MD and his colleagues) which is extremely

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informative and useful.³ It covers topics like Responsibilities for Editors, What Potential Editors Should Know Before Accepting the Position, The Editorial Process i.e. office organization, editorial contents, publication policies, manuscript evaluation, reviewers, decision making and communicating with authors, types of articles besides other responsibilities.

WAME and EMAME Listserve

WAME and EMAME both have an active List serve where important issues regarding medical editing are discussed. WAME List serve in particular is extremely useful while many issues more relevant to developing third world countries are discussed by editors of biomedical journals from WHO EMRO Region on EMAME List serve. Hence, all the editors and others associated with medical journal editing in different capacities should become members of both these organizations. They will find the debate and discussion on different issues very informative and rewarding. EMAME has held three conferences so far the first one at Cairo in 2003, at Riyadh in 2004 which provided a rare opportunity for learning.^{4,5}

Learning through experience and from mistakes

Editors of biomedical journals at times have to walk on tight ropes. Particularly editors of biomedical journals which are owned and published by specialty organizations at times have to face numerous problems when there is a difference of opinion and conflict of interest as regards editorial policy. During the last couple of years we have seen the Editors of JAMA, New England Journal of Medicine and Journal of Canadian Medical Association being fired which lead to serious debate as regards editorial independence in the medical press.⁶ To create a balance between pursuing an independent editorial policy and the economic interests of the sponsoring organization, specialty organization is not an easy task which at times leads to serious differences.

Report by Royal College of Obstetrician and Gynaecologists

Report of the independent committee of inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the publication of two articles in the British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in August 1994 also throws some light the problems the editors can face. This report was prepared on the instructions of the

Council of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists which was published in May 1995.⁷ The committee which included John Spokes QC (Chairman), Prof. Ian Greer MCOG, Mr. Frank Loeffler FRCOG, Prof. Lesley Rees FRCP, Prof. Richard Smith FRCP and Prof. Sir Leslie Turnberg FRCP looked in to detail the circumstances under which two papers got published in British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology by Pearce JM and colleagues got published and their implications. The inquiry committee also came up with a set of extremely useful recommendations to avoid such mishaps in future wherein fake data and manuscripts could not be published in the journal. They have suggested that if such articles based on fake data have been published, they should be formally retracted. They have also discussed the role of co-authors, retraction of misleading articles, submission of articles, editorial processing of articles submitted, statistical assessment of submitted manuscripts, publication of case reports, conduct of editorial meetings, system of dealing with papers where an editor has an interest or association, editorial freedom, editorial and administrative organization of the journal and reporting to the Council, training in research, future investigations besides relations with Media. These recommendations make an interesting reading and editors of biomedical journals particularly those journals sponsored and published by specialty organizations will find it extremely useful. That is how one learns from the mistakes made by others.

Useful Books

Editors of biomedical journals have to communicate and deal with a large number of reviewers since Peer Review is an important aspect to ensure quality of the manuscripts accepted for publication and standard of the journal. Hence the editors themselves must be fully aware of the Peer Review Process. Many useful books are available which cover most of these issues and provide extremely useful information for the Editors. Peer Review in Health Sciences by Fiona Godlee and Tom Jefferson published by BMJ Group is one such book which the editors will find useful. It has contributions by thirty authors most of whom are distinguished editors and they have covered a wide range of topics on medical journalism with particular reference to Peer Review process.⁸

How to Read a Paper- The basics of evidence based medicine by Trisha Greenhalg which is also published by BMJ Publishing Group⁹ is another useful book. What Editors Demand and What Authors Want to Know” by

Shaukat Ali Jawaid has been published by Pakistan Medical Journalists Association which deals with the local scenario and gives examples for the authors and editors. Editors and authors may find it yet another useful resource.¹⁰

Other resources on the Net

While surfing the net, one may also find many other sources of information which can be extremely helpful for the editors of biomedical journals.

Hence if facilities and funding is not available to attend courses and workshops on training of editors, one can still find some sources and avenues to learn and improve the expertise as regards editing a biomedical journal.

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