Medical Journalism: Problems and Prospects

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The story of publication of medical journals reflects the history of both medical practice and science. These are a major link between science and practice. Medical journalism is of vital importance for the diffusion of knowledge and of new ideas. Medical journals brought an element of timeliness to dissemination of medical information. Discrepancy between medical wisdom and the health of general population well justifies need of medical journals. Through medical journals professionals are privileged to have a medium for presenting their experiences in a logical manner. It is through medical journalism that professionals around the globe try to understand the working of people belonging to different specialties and in different set ups. It gives a chance to critically analyze our own and then other peoples’ practices, fallacies and shortcomings. It gives a guideline to envision the future prospects. For all that objectivity, depth of knowledge, hand on experience and to look into the life’s solid problems with a sympathetic and empathetic view is required. Continuous hunting and chasing of reviewers, proof reading, not succumbing to pressures from colleagues, plagiarism checking, printing, management of website, request to senior people to share their experience as editorial notes, redundant publications, conflict of interest, ghost authors, clearance from ethical boards, dispatching the journals, to satisfy the needs of PMDC, HEC, CPSP and many other statutory bodies, etc., all these are part and parcel of medical journalism. All inclusive as a single package, no exclusion. To reject an article, at the cost of jeopardizing relationships, is a tough option, choice is yours!!! Financial materialization of all the matters related with running of a medical journal needs someone to be marketing and financial smart. To be a member of the editorial board seems to be prestigious. The journal desires the contribution of the members in the form of a manuscript, at least once a year. It needs soul searching and self analysis that how many times we even reviewed a submitted article, sent to us for review? More frequent a journal is, more engagement and secretarial assistance it requires. Falling short of which can enormously increase the risk of errors and mistakes. Letters to editors, short communications and other similar items reflect broader and critical view point. Unfortunately due to financial constraints and to provide more space to original articles, which owes credit for the authors, these are more or less abandoned in most of the journals.

Developing world journals highlights issues pertinent to their countries, which are dissimilar to those of developed world. Unfortunately this leads to a failure in achieving an “impact factor”, with a bench mark of developed world criteria. To go forward it is the high time to analyze numeric measures of quality for impact assessment. Impact of medical journalism on human miseries and then the impact of human miseries on medical journalism are important as well to get an “impact factor”, may be from our own set up or from a foreign standard. Only a few journals of Pakistan are indexed. Does it means that the data generated by Pakistani journals is not of the worth to be counted for? Although developing countries encompass 80% of the world’s population and account for approximately 25% of the world’s scientists, all the main stream journals are published in developed nations. The roughly 2% participation in the international scientific discourse allowed by Western indexing services is simply too little to account for the scientific output of 80% of the world. Not being indexed along with small circulation of the small journals can result in low visibility. If a journal has limited circulation, but by having a dynamic website with all its contents visible, different search engines, like “Google Scholar”, can make it accessible to all around the world. That in turn can improve the citation rate of its publications.

Medical journals, at times, reflect matters which at present seems to be obscure or trivial or insignificant. But they may have a futuristic value by predicting what can become significant in times to come. Journals might be said to have become more scientific and stringent in criterias as the rigour of the methods of the studies they publish have improved. A medical journal can be a major asset to medical community. It can move medicine forward, less by providing a clear direction of travel and more through highlighting the deficiencies of the present, and providing many ideas on how to do better. Most of the medical journals are, by and large, taking seriously the tasks of trying to elevate medical literacy and keeping alive the tradition of the physician a learned man. They need breathing space, amid numerous constraints.