Medical Writing- Editors’ Perspective

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Last two decades have witnessed a surge in medical writing in Pakistan, with a sustained and logarithmic increase in the number of medical journals published from all the corners. Every newly emerging medical college, especially in private sector would add a golden feather in its cap, thereby providing a forum to its faculty to fulfill the stringent PMDC requirement of publishing research articles. Consequently, the journals are in demand of research articles, and vice versa.

In this editorial, effort is being made to look into the medical publications from an editor’s perspective, and to point out certain aspects of medical writing which, if cared for, would facilitate the publication of research articles with a relative ease. Let us first look into the steps a research article is subjected to in the process of editing and peer review, before it is approved or rejected for publication.

As a research article is received with a request for publication, it is registered, a reference number is allocated, and its receipt is acknowledged. A copy each of the article is emailed to one of the members of the editorial committee for initial editing, statistician for looking into the appropriateness of statistical tools applied and the statistical analysis, and to the bibliographer for checking and verifying the references. If all three of them recommend, the article is now sent to at least two peer-reviewers, with a request to send their detailed feed-back on a proforma. If the reviewers approve or disapprove the article, it is accepted or rejected for publication, and the author is intimated about the decision. If at any stage from internal editing to peer-review, any amendments are advised, the manuscript is referred back to the author, with relevant comments, with a request to make desired changes. The main objective of this elaborate exercise is to bring the publication in conformity with the uniform international standards of medical writing.

A research article which an editor approves without referring it back to the author for revision is one which has meaningful and clearly defined objectives; a crisp title (which takes into account the main objective); a structured abstract; key words according to MeSH format; materials and methods indicating the type of study, inclusion and exclusion criteria, clearly defined variables, correctly applied statistical tools, and correctly analyzed data; a precise description of results, without being repetitive, with reference to tables, figures and diagrams, which are properly constructed and numbered; quotation of references in the text in chronological orders; and documentation of references at the end of the article in the required format (usually in Vancouver style). It is advisable that the beginners have a checklist of all these essentials of an article, and once they think the article is now ready for dispatching to the journal, they counter-check it according to this list. It is also important that in addition to the author, all the co-authors should check the article for subject matter, spellings and grammar mistakes.

Another approach for an editor to finally approve or disapprove an article for publication in his journal is to firstly see if the subject of the article satisfies the journal’s policy, secondly evaluate the objectives if they are clearly described and would be useful from clinical standpoint, thirdly look into all the sections of the article (introduction; materials and methods; results, tables, diagrams and figures; and discussion) with a focus on the defined objectives, and finally, if the conclusions focus adequately on the objectives, thereby discretely proving or disproving the hypothesis. Keeping under consideration the importance of the given objectives in paper writing, an experienced writer would keep them in the back of his mind while writing the paper.

The latest ‘mouse-trap’ available with the editors is the software for scanning the submitted articles for plagiarism. It is easy to evade this ‘check-post’. The ‘trick of the trade’ is “do not copy and paste” and write in your own words, even if you are liable to make grammatical mistakes; these can be corrected by your co-authors, seniors and even the editors; and do not worry about vocabulary; no one, not even Mark Twain, is impressed by the use of difficult words for which one may have to consult a dictionary.

It is important to remember that certain terms commonly used by epidemiologists, if used incorrectly, would make the article promptly fly back to the
author for correction, or at least raise the temper of ‘literary hawks’, the editor. Therefore, use of the terms ‘frequency, incidence, prevalence, significant difference, and significance’ should be used precisely according to definitions by an epidemiologist.

There are certain distasteful practices which are better avoided. One of these is to make numerous papers out of one; this is usually done in an attempt to increase the number of publications and thus strengthen one’s C.V., without realizing that such a practice would not go un-noticed, and would only compromise one’s credibility as a medical writer. Likewise, deliberately mislabeling a retrospective study as a prospective study, declaring an abortive or small scale study as a pilot study while there is no intention to continue it into a large scale study, and inclusion amongst co-authors name of someone who has not contributed significantly in the research project are only a few of the prevalent ethical issues of concern. However, such issues can be handled by implementing vigilant monitoring systems, and PMDC and Higher Education Commission are probably doing a commendable job in this direction.

During editing, apparently almost every step, starting from designing of a study, contemplating it and then writing the manuscript, is under scrutiny. A safe recipe to get it published is a loud message in the study. A reproducible and applicable message can surpass, to an extent, many mathematical, statistical, grammatical and linguistic hurdles. Reviewer is not envy to any one’s painstaking efforts and then the editor is also there as a guardian of the manuscript. Dr Wazir Agha, a renowned literary figure and having a credit of editing literary magazines for more than three decades, proclaimed that “the job of an editor is like a sailor who has to craft a safe voyage for the ship amidst volatile and cruel sea tides”.

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