

Essays

Medical editing in India

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Abstract

This article is the outcome of my experience as an active author, reviewer, and editorial board member of a few journals, especially related to five years of editing a small, local, Indian biomedical journal, namely the *Andhra Pradesh Journal of Psychological Medicine*.

Keywords

India; biomedical journals; editing; editors

The editors of Indian biomedical journals, like most academic editors, are busy people with various roles and responsibilities. They are busy clinicians, managing around a hundred patients a day (Table 1). Physicians in private practice have no administrative support, whereas those in an academic setting have teaching responsibilities. Hence, when I talk about an Indian editor, we need to imagine a physician with clinical, academic, research and other responsibilities. Editorial work has to be done in addition to these tasks in their 'spare time'.

Table 1. Indian population and journals: statistics

Population	MCI* registered allopathic doctors	Doctor-patient ratio	IndMed indexed journals
1210.2 million ¹	918,889	0.7 / 1000	100

*MCI=Medical Council of India

Databases

In India, there is not much awareness of organisations concerning science publishing, such as the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), the Committee of Publication Ethics (COPE), the European Association of Science Editors (EASE) or their guidelines, like the Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials (CONSORT statement)⁵.

Indian researchers make significant contributions to scientific knowledge but this is not properly compiled and disseminated. To the best of my knowledge, except for IndMED/MedIND, no other Indian database indexes journals. Unfortunately, many high-ranking Indian journals that are indexed in PubMed or other databases are not indexed in IndMed. The Indian Citation Index evaluates indigenous journals and tracks the citations of manuscripts⁶.

Editor-related issues

Editing an Indian journal is a herculean task, and our editors mostly do a good job within the available resources. While a few prestigious journals, such as the *Indian Journal of Medical Research*, the *Journal of Indian Medical Association*, and the *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* have been publishing good quality research, until recently, not many people understood the need to publish research from India and therefore there has been little for Indian journals to publish. Table 2 shows the SCImago journal and country rank of some Asian countries.

Table 2. SCImago Journal & Country Rank: Country rankings⁷

Subject area: **Medicine**, Region: **Asiatic**, Year: **2013**

Rank	Country	Documents	Citable documents	Citations	Self-citations	Citations per document	H index
1	China	58699	55695	22796	6599	0.39	243
2	Japan	37425	33555	16991	3565	0.45	430
3	India	22947	19179	6012	1525	0.26	194
4	South Korea	17860	16354	7653	1379	0.43	214
5	Taiwan	9450	8503	4354	754	0.46	215
6	Singapore	3749	3341	2724	306	0.73	186
7	Hong Kong	3340	3000	2694	375	0.81	225
8	Malaysia	3093	2893	1187	268	0.38	94
9	Thailand	2945	2675	1546	236	0.52	154
10	Pakistan	2822	2594	745	154	0.26	92

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There is now increased awareness since the Medical Council of India has made publication mandatory for career advancement; hence, faculty members are looking for journals to which to send their papers. This has led to every college and university wanting to start a journal. I believe "There is a need to improve the quality of existing journals, rather than starting new ones"⁸. If we focus on the new ones, the quality of all is bound to suffer.

Most Indian journals are owned by learned societies, and their editors are elected, which is not the best process⁹. Such editors may be in office for a brief period of only two

to three years; by the time they understand the complexities, their term ends. For others, the editor position is just another addition to their curriculum vitae and they hardly contribute to the journal⁹. Sathyanarayana and Sharma⁹, enumerate problems associated with publishing in India (Table 3).

Table 3. Some common problems encountered in scientific publishing in India⁹

Journals	Editors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not on time • Poor accessibility & coverage • Poor technical editing • Inferior quality of content • No checking of authenticity • Bias in sample selection • No novelty in most cases • Study design not clear • Authorship • Ethics • References not checked 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flawed/biased peer review • No check on simultaneous duplicate submission • Poor statistics • No systems of data sharing • Checks on plagiarism/duplicate publication • Poor scientific editing • Authorship/contributorship issues • Conflicts of interest (COI) not declared • Industry sponsored research/Financial COI • Registration of clinical trials • No co-ordination among other journals • Unprofessional

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Financial constraints of Indian editors

Indian medical editors work under severe financial constraints. I consider this the most important barrier to improving editorial standards. Until recently, Indian societies were not really willing to invest funds in improving the quality of their journals. The editor had to rely on sponsorship from pharmaceutical companies (provided through the society in a transparent manner) as per local regulations¹⁰, which would usually only cover the printing costs of the journal. Other sources include society's funds and journal subscription fees. A sponsor should have no influence on the editorial decisions. The editor is guided only by the quality of the manuscript, the journal policy, the reviewers and the editorial board. Indian journals have been mostly publishing academic research, rather than research funded by pharmaceutical companies. As Sathyanarayana and Sharma wrote, "Conflict of interest (COI) has understandably been receiving the attention of editors in the west primarily due to the publication of clinical trials with pharma industry funding... As of now it is not yet a serious enough problem in India"⁹.

Editors and editorial board members have to declare any conflict of interest. The editor declares to the society the "amount, nature and extent" of any support received. My journal, the *Andhra Pradesh Journal of Psychological Medicine*, states "The appearance of advertising...does not constitute an endorsement...by the journal".

Author-related issues

Indian authors who lack experience in publishing are at risk from predatory journals with the word 'international' in their title. Many Indian researchers may not be aware of what constitutes a good journal. For them, PubMed indexing and the impact factor are the most important criteria. Many are not aware of other databases such as Scopus, Embase, and PsychInfo. The phrase "indexed journal" itself is not clear¹¹.

A positive point regarding most Indian medical journals is that the authors need not pay article submission and processing fees. Also, most Indian medical journals make their articles freely available on publication, without the need for the author to pay an open access fee. This is very important because most Indian researchers cannot afford such fees.

Author-related problems encountered by me as the editor of *Andhra Pradesh Journal of Psychological Medicine*

These problems are based on my experiences and are not specific to Indian authors, because my journal receives submissions from foreign researchers also.

Covering letter and misuse of peer review

My major task as an editor was to educate authors regarding publication ethics. One example is the content of the covering letter, which clearly states several points and is signed by the authors. However, it appears that authors may not read this properly and submit it without understanding what they have signed.

Case study

My journal requires authors to furnish the following undertaking: "I understand that the manuscript once submitted cannot be withdrawn under any circumstance unless considered unsuitable for publication by the editor". A novel review paper was submitted. The peer reviewers gave excellent comments and I requested the author for a revision. The author withdrew his paper in spite of me reiterating that my journal guidelines do not allow this. My guess is that the author was going to use the peer reviewers' suggestions to improve the manuscript then submit it to a high-ranking prestigious journal. In the last issue of my journal, of 29 manuscripts submitted, five (17.2 %) were withdrawn at various stages. How can an editor force authors to submit a revised manuscript? Submission fees might be one way. I will request COPE for guidance as this is wastage of resources.

Authorship

The covering letter that my journal requires asks for signed author statements¹², listing each author's contribution. It also asks for a declaration that the "current list is the final list of authors (no change of authorship is allowed once the authors submit this covering letter)". As in other parts of the world, in India there are problems with gift authorship^{9,13}. This is difficult for an editor to detect, as it relies on self-declaration by authors but if authors inform the editor that they are being asked by a third party to make changes to the list, the editor can refuse, citing the ICMJE guidelines¹².

Case study

I received an original submission; the authors were spouses. After the peer review was complete, the first author (husband) called me saying that his wife (the second author) was upset that she was not listed as first author, though most of the work was done by her, and requested that I change the sequence. I had to obtain a fresh covering letter restating the order of authorship. Since then, I have added the following to the covering letter, "The author ...will act as the guarantor of this paper, and is responsible for all issues related to authorship, including the order of authorship."

Case study

The author of an original article was unable to address the peer reviewers' comments, so offered me co-authorship and expected me to resolve these queries on his behalf. I refused, saying I cannot be an author for a manuscript to which I did not contribute.

Duplicate publication

Case study

A very good case report was submitted to my journal. After sending the peer reviewers' comments to the author, I received a review request from an international journal. I was shocked to see that the case report and the authors were exactly the same as the one that I was considering for my journal. This was early in the course of my editorship when my journal was not a member of any organisations concerning science publishing. I took the following measures:

- i) informed the authors that this amounts to duplicate publication which is a publication fraud
- ii) withdrew the article from my manuscript submission system
- iii) notified the author's supervisor (using details from the institution's website)
- iv) informed the editor of the other journal, and
- v) withdrew from reviewing this manuscript.

The second editor withdrew the manuscript from his journal. COPE has guidelines about how to deal with cases of duplicate publication¹⁴.

Acknowledgements

Acknowledging others in a manuscript¹² increases the validity of work with more likelihood of being helped in future. I noticed authors leaving this section blank; when encouraged, they subsequently mentioned the names and the nature of their help¹². The editors should check that authors acknowledge people who helped them in their research by asking them to complete this section when no information is provided.

Editors' responsibilities

Communicating rejection

Editors, particularly of small, local journals, have a responsibility to educate authors. If they reject a manuscript, they should succinctly communicate the reason. Constructive feedback can help an author to revise the manuscript and improve the chances of acceptance by another journal or the design of future studies.

Handling complaints related to publication fraud

Recently, I was shocked to see one of my publications substantially copied verbatim by another author. I complained to the editor of the second journal; I am yet to receive an acknowledgment. If I do not get a reply, I intend to approach the editor of the journal in which my article was published. Editors should be proactive in detecting publication fraud; for example, before sending a manuscript for review, they should screen for plagiarism and prior publication using tools such as CrossCheck.

Peer review

"I hold reviewers in high regard...consider them the most important ingredient of a successful journal...An intelligent editor takes reviewers' comments seriously, and he takes the credit."¹⁶ The phrase "peer-reviewed journal" is important for indexing authorities, but how seriously editors take reviewers' comments is a matter of concern. A blanket statement, such as "the editor's decision is final" might give scope for manipulation. In that case, what's the point in having a peer review? Some journals make available the pre-publication history with the reviewers' comments alongside the published manuscript¹⁷. This is a good option which local journals could consider adopting.

Recommendations

Databases and editor associations

"Non-inclusion of these (Indian) journals in the global databases means that even good research reported in these journals remains largely unknown to the world"⁹. The Indian Council of Medical Research should invite the editors of high ranking internationally indexed Indian journals who are not yet its members to index with IndMed/MedInd⁴. There is a need for locally active editorial associations, such as the Indian Association of Medical Journal Editors (IAMJE)¹⁵, to help editors improve their editorial standards.

Training of editors

Indians can do wonders; a few among us are editing prestigious international journals. What is needed is resources and training⁹. Organisations such as ICMJE, COPE, EASE, the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME), and IAMJE have an important role in publication ethics. Indian editors should seek their membership and prominently display the affiliation in their journals. These organisations should help to train the member editors. WAME has regional meetings in India in association with IAMJE and the *National Medical Journal of India*.

Indian editors should act as authors and reviewers for other journals; they can thus learn from other editors. In this way, I improved my editorial skills.

Guidance from editorial board members

The editor should seek active guidance from editorial board members who are expert researchers. For my journal, 15% of the members are simultaneously the editors of other journals; three of which are PubMed indexed. I was fortunate to be guided by these members in improving the quality of my journal.

Publication schedule

Many prestigious journals mention the date of submission and the date of the first and final decisions alongside each published manuscript. I wish Indian editors would start doing this as it is an indicator of the rapidity of the review process. An author may consider a journal for submission if the time is short; however, an ultra-short processing time might raise questions regarding its quality.

Encourage authors to cite Indian research

Agoramoorthy¹⁸ suggested that Indian editors should encourage Indian researchers to cite papers published in Indian journals, which will improve their visibility. However, such citation should be done ethically.

Editorial independence

In India, not many people understand the concept of editorial independence¹⁹. The belief is that the editor is elected by the society and hence should work towards its aims and objectives. I specifically see to it that my society talks about editorial independence.

Journal finances

Editors should explore avenues to obtain finance to run a journal:

- i) the entire cost of publishing should be borne by the society
- ii) a nominal author processing charge may be levied from the authors
- iii) sponsorship from pharmaceutical and other agencies based on regulations.

“Medical journals do not need to separate themselves from pharmaceutical companies intensely once the relationship with companies can be ethically sound”²⁰.

Online-only journals

Dai *et al*²⁰ summarised various measures to improve journals:

- i) “optimize the process of peer review
- ii) utilise open-access publishing models actively
- iii) find ways of saving costs and getting revenue
- iv) deal with research fraud or misconduct
- v) maintain sound relationship with pharmaceutical companies, and
- vi) prove useful in clinical practice and research realm”.

I attended a workshop where Mr. Meester, Senior Product Manager, Scopus, explained the necessary attributes of a good journal and how a local journal could attain international stature²¹.

Conclusions

Indian editors should seek membership of various organisations concerning science publishing and undergo regular training. They should strictly follow publication guidelines, ensure that all stakeholders adhere to these, and diligently pursue complaints related to publication fraud. If we, the Indian biomedical editors, can do this, our small local journals can become truly international.

Disclaimer

The views expressed are solely those of the author and do not reflect their endorsement by the journal, the editorial board, the publisher, the society, the organisation, or the institution with which he is associated.

Author information

The author is the guest associate editor of *Frontiers in Psychiatry*; section Addictive Disorders and Behavioural Dyscontrol, and currently editing a research topic. He is a peer reviewer for many national and international journals.

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Competing interests

None declared

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Peer review incentives: a simple idea to encourage fast and effective peer review

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Cofounder of Publons

A conflict inherent in peer review is that we expect researchers to put aside their own research priorities to selflessly help with the research of strangers. Picture it—a typical Friday afternoon. A researcher sits down at her desk, pushes out all thoughts of what she might do with a hint of spare time this weekend, and starts writing up the latest results from the lab. An email notification interrupting her train of thought warrants a groan. Another request to review; the third this week. What takes priority? Finishing her own research article so she can at least tell her employer it has been submitted before her performance evaluation next week, or anonymously helping out with someone else's work? When we do accept review requests, it is often reluctantly, and only out of a combination of duty, guilt, and hope for reciprocation. Peer review is a chore; a distraction from more career-relevant activities.

This situation leads to predictable problems. Rejection of review invitations is the norm. Editors have to find and screen ten potential reviewers just to secure two peer reviews. Reviewers lack the motivation to return review assignments promptly, and receive the same attribution—almost none—whether their reviewing is comprehensive or careless. Review quality is so varied that research on peer review struggles to find any evidence of its effectiveness¹. Editors are torn between burdening their favourite reviewers with excessive review requests and gambling on unknown and potentially unsuitable reviewers. Flawed work slips through and leads to embarrassing article retractions. Fabricated reviewers go undetected by busy editors, and we end up reading about it in the *New York Times*².

Opinions on the state of peer review vary—former *BMJ* editor Richard Smith recently declared it time to “slay the sacred cow” of peer review³—but most agree it can be improved. The 2014 Nature Publishing Group Author Insights survey found 77% of researchers agree (or strongly agree) that “traditional peer review processes could be made more efficient”. Seventy per cent agreed with the statement “I am frequently frustrated by the length of time the process of peer review takes”⁴. And for good reason: a single peer review takes about four hours, but organising two or three reviews takes on average four months or more. We in the industry have become used to this delay in publication, but in the age of the internet it is scarcely believable.

The primary reason for these issues is the absence of incentives for reviewers. Some publishers offer discounts, perks, and the odd certificate, but this clearly is not enough. Paying for peer review is an interesting option, but the real currency of academia is reputation. To motivate peer reviewers we need to provide a way for the peer review process to improve their academic reputation.