

## Essays

### Problems faced by editors of biomedical journals in Mexico

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**Abstract** The difficulties in editing medical journals in Mexico are due mainly to inadequate professional training, problems in editorial workflow, lack of recognition, and limited incentives. Editing is not recognized as a profession; therefore, there are no professional career development opportunities for editors. It behoves university medical schools to establish professional editorial training courses, and international organizations should support the education and training of medical journal editors in Mexico. It is essential to revive the system of evaluating Mexican health journals. Medical journals from Mexico should be published in Spanish and in English, and in electronic form, to facilitate the dissemination of research carried out in Mexico. A Mexican citation and measurement index is desirable.

**Keywords:** Medical editors; editorial process; education; research.

#### Introduction

About 85 medical journals are published in Mexico at present. The editors of these journals, who are primarily physicians, work with dedication and responsibility; however, they face many problems: some common to editors worldwide, others more specific to Mexico. Small medical journals have limited financial and technical resources: articles are published in the local language and the journals have a small circulation. Even established journals may have poor editorial workflow. This is partly due to insufficient editorial time because the editors are part-time employees, with little or no experience, and lack a professional approach to their work. Although many international editing organizations offer training and education, the opportunities are ignored by many editors. Authors are reluctant to publish in Mexican journals irrespective of the journal's quality and number of readers.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, some of these problems are analysed. The suggestions offered in the paper are not based on research but reflect the author's views, based on personal experience. It is hoped that this account will encourage editors from other countries to share their experiences, thus providing ideas and suggestions to overcome the difficulties described here.

#### Medical Editors in Mexico

To find out how medical editors work in Mexico, I contacted the editorial staff of journals identified from databases of medical literature on the web, namely MEDIGRAPHIC and IMBIOMED.<sup>2,3</sup> MEDIGRAPHIC lists 190 Latin American

medical journals, 82 of which are published in Mexico, whereas IMBIOMED lists 136 journals, of which 51 were either inactive or did not provide complete information. I emailed a questionnaire to 50 editors, seeking information about their editorial responsibilities, training, if any, and whether they received any honorarium and from whom. Thirteen responded to the questionnaire: most had received no training and only one was paid (Table 1).

**Table 1. Results of a survey of aspects of professionalism among medical journal editors in Mexico, 2013. The survey was sent to 50 editors, of whom 13 responded.**

Parameter	Number
<b>Editor's academic background</b>	
Physician	11
Biologist	2
<b>Editor Training</b>	
None	11
Courses of Associations or Institutions	7
Medical Editing required by medical societies or institutions	7
<b>Salary</b>	
Yes (paid by university)	1
No	12

#### Problems encountered by medical journal editors

*Lack of professional recognition:* In Mexico, as in other countries, the majority of physicians responsible for editing journals are renowned medical professionals, experienced in publishing and revising research papers. However, they have no prior training in editing and have turned to editing as a matter of personal choice, on invitation, or having been assigned editorial responsibilities by the management of the institutes in which they work. More than 95% of the editors receive no payment for their editorial duties and most do not have the support of their own institutions or of medical societies to attend meetings or participate in training courses related to editorial work (Table 1). In Mexico, only the national health institutes consistently include expenses for medical journals in their budgets. The editor's term of office

is often only a few years, especially for journals published by medical societies. It has been recommended that editors and editorial boards should not be changed so frequently and may even be considered as tenure-track positions.<sup>4</sup> If salaries for the majority of editors in Mexico do not go up in the near future – the inevitable outcome of apathy on part of the government – the situation will remain unchanged.

*External influences:* Editors may be subject to pressure to accept certain manuscripts by the society or institution that owns the journal and appoints the editor. Less frequently, editors are subsidized by pharmaceutical companies, who promote their business interests through the journal.

*Inadequate number of articles:* Editors face frequent problems in getting enough original articles to fill at least half the pages of each issue. The reasons are many, even after the initial submission: authors reject reviewers' observations and therefore do not revise the articles; do not correct their manuscripts and do not return the revised versions.<sup>1</sup>

*Authors:* The articles sent to the journals for publication are poorly written, often with deficiencies in format, content, illustrations, references and originality, as well as not complying with the journal's guidelines for authors. Authors are reluctant to submit their manuscripts to Mexican journals for fear that their publications will not be cited: articles published in Mexican journals are not cited frequently even when they are of good quality (the Matthew effect).<sup>5</sup> Biomedical researchers in Mexico publish less than 10% of their output in Mexican journals.<sup>1,6</sup>

*Peer review:* Many Mexican biomedical journals find it difficult to get suitable reviewers, especially international reviewers. The most common fault of Mexican peer reviewers is that they do not return the articles entrusted to them for review in time. Occasionally, the reviewers are biased or even antagonistic, and tend to judge a manuscript not on its merits but on such extraneous considerations as affiliation and membership of informal networks. The editor is obliged to respect a reviewer's verdict and communicate that to the author, although such decisions are not always fair, along with the reviewer's comments. Sometimes the reviewer's comments are acerbic enough to deter the author from submitting a manuscript to that journal ever again. Excessive confidence in reviewers and the editorial body may be unwarranted. At times, articles rejected by reviewers for Mexican journals have been accepted and published in English-language journals with high impact factors.

### Problems encountered by medical journals

Of the 136 Mexican journals that offer full text of the articles they publish in MEDIGRAPHIC and IMBIOMED, some are run by medical societies, some by health institutes, and some are subsidized by the pharmaceutical industry. Fifty-one of these journals had no consistency in publication; at least ten were no longer published; and six had changed platform in order to continue as Open Access journals. Journals that depend on income from advertisements are always at risk, and financial considerations influence the placement of advertisements, the length of articles, and even the choice of articles, with those that further the interests of the advertiser being favoured, although such

practices violate the ethics of publishing and most editors are opposed to them.<sup>7</sup>

### Accreditation of journals

Organizations created by institutions, such as the National Center of Information, Documentation and Decisions in Health (Centro Nacional de Información, Documentación y Decisiones en Salud, CENIDS) and the Articles Edited in Mexico on Information on Health (Artículos Editados en México Sobre Información en Salud, ARTEMISA) of the National Institute of Public Health (Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública), have been particularly effective in the monitoring and accreditation of journals. To gain a place in ARTEMISA, a journal must be published electronically and satisfy additional criteria. Eight years ago, a procedure was established for evaluating journals through the System of Evaluation of Mexican Health Journals (Sistema de Evaluación de Revistas Mexicanas en Salud). In recent years, and for unknown reasons, the operation of the system has been curtailed.<sup>8</sup>

Bibliometrics, which include such indices as the impact factor and the *h*-index, serve to indicate the quality of a published paper. Yet, Mexico has no effective national policy to support bibliometrics.

### Quality of Mexican research articles

Mexican physicians are encouraged to publish the results of their research in Mexican journals, with publications in journals approved by the National Council of Science and Technology of Mexico (*Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología de México*, CONACyT) being particularly important for career advancement. The committee of experts responsible for the approval is very strict in its selection of journals, and approved only three in 2013 in medicine and the sciences: *Annals of Hepatology*, *Archivos de Cardiología de México / Mexican Archives of Cardiology*, and *Salud Pública de México / Mexican Public Health*.

The assumption that articles published in Mexico are of poor quality was tested in a study that analyzed the originality, impact and applicability of publications by means of subjective evaluation by scientists of the quality of their colleagues' contributions.<sup>6</sup> The quality of Mexican research was judged to be neither better nor worse than that not only in countries with similar levels of development but also in the most scientifically developed nations. And yet, physicians of other nations do not consult good-quality original articles published in Mexico.<sup>1,6</sup>

### Researchers' preferred language of publication

For greater visibility and the likelihood of being cited, researchers prefer to publish in English in foreign journals with higher impact factors, which are included in the Thompson-Reuters' database *Journal Citation Reports* (JCR) and the Web of Knowledge. If researchers do consider publishing in Mexican journals, they limit their choice to Mexican journals that are included in JCR, such as *Annals of Hepatology*, *Archives of Medical Research* or *Salud Pública de México*.

The main problems that confront editors of biomedical journals in Mexico are summarized in Table 2.

**Lack of professionalism**

Generally part-time, with no financial support  
 Little professional recognition or reward  
 Inexperienced editorial teams, exacerbated by short terms of office of editors  
 Scarce or no financial support for editorial training  
 Deficient functioning of organizations responsible for monitoring and accrediting journals  
 Bias arising from institutional or governmental mandates

**Authors and peer reviewers**

Insufficient original articles of suitable quality  
 Authors' contempt for publishing in national journals  
 Poor translation of manuscripts submitted in a language other than the editor's first language  
 Low standards of peer review including slow processing  
 Frequent author noncompliance with feedback to correct article deficiencies  
 Ethical problems, eg duplicate publications

**Viability of journals**

Failures caused by deficient economic resources and other considerations that prevent publication  
 Dependence on pharmaceutical advertisements  
 Complimentary copies distributed to physicians contribute to lack of understanding of scientific quality  
 No mechanism to ascertain national impact of authors' contributions

**Table 2. Problems faced by Mexican medical journal editors****Suggestions for the improvement of biomedical publishing in Mexico****Editorial training and recognition**

Being the editor of a medical journal requires integrity and credibility; this should be rewarded in career assessment and, where possible, financially. Medical societies should seek ways to support training for editors and editorial staff. Frequent changes of editors and staff should be avoided.

University medical schools should establish courses on editing especially for those who have already trained as physicians and for other professionals interested in publishing. Editors could also attend training outside Mexico. Several international organizations, such as the World Association of Medical Editors and the European Association of Science Editors, offer to support training. Some offers are specifically for countries in Latin America<sup>9,10</sup>

The establishment of the Mexican Association of Editors of Biomedical Journals (Asociación Mexicana de Editores de Revistas Biomédicas, AMERBAC) in 1997 has contributed favourably to the profession of editing. The organization holds two meetings a year to exchange experiences and train editors and editorial staff. The meetings have certainly led to better medical editing and equipped the editors to face new challenges.

**Improved communication with authors**

Journal editors should encourage authors to submit to their journal by explaining clearly and concisely how manuscripts are reviewed, edited, and published and how aspiring authors should choose their target journals and prepare their articles in keeping with that journal's instructions to authors. Editorial staff should maintain good communication with authors throughout the process.

**Journal evaluation and recognition**

Journals should be bilingual as far as possible, in Spanish and English, at least for abstracts.

Some journals could be amalgamated, eg by region or specialty, to improve manuscript flow and concentrate resources. The systematic review of journals published in Mexico should be revived, with some additional criteria: electronic availability of full text of articles, originality and scientific relevance of the research, proportion of original articles, a clear table of contents, the standing of members of the editorial committee and the standing of reviewers. A Mexican citation index recognized by the organizations responsible for appraising researchers would certainly motivate Mexican researchers to publish in such nationally recognized journals.

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