

My Life as an Editor - Mohammad Abdollahi



I am an editorial board member of more than 30 international scholarly journals. Over the past decades, I have served as a referee for more than 100 journals. I receive at least one reviewer invitation daily, and try my best to respond to most invitations (approximately 70%). As a researcher and supervisor of numerous students, I write, edit and revise 3-5 papers monthly. My writing and editing skills have greatly improved by publishing more than 450 papers in peer-reviewed journals. As an author, I treasure my experience of communication with reviewers and editors, who have guided me and helped me to become a science editor. All these achievements stem from my academic career in Tehran University of Medical Sciences (TUMS), the most highly ranked medical school in Iran, where I was offered a post back in the 1990s.

A turning point in my editing career was an invitation to take up the chief editor post of TUMS's two most influential journals, *DARU Journal of Pharmaceutical Sciences* (www.darujps.com/), and *Journal of Medical Hypotheses and Ideas* (<http://ees.elsevier.com/jmhi>), now published by BioMed Central and Elsevier, respectively. Back in 2001, I joined the DARU journal as an associate editor and helped in its conversion from a Persian to an English language journal and in indexing for online databases. Indexing was not an easy task back then, but I managed to get the journal indexed in most relevant databases by 2003. I am very proud of that achievement, which made DARU the most widely visible medium of communication for Eastern Mediterranean pharmacists and pharmacologists.

The *Journal of Medical Hypotheses and Ideas* was

launched as an Iranian journal in 2007, and I was asked to edit it. Over the past five years, the journal has gradually become an international medium by widening its scope of interests and by diversifying its geography, authorship, reviewers' pool and editorial board membership. It is now an updated source of biomedical information for the whole Eastern Mediterranean region.

In 2004, I was offered the post of the Dean of TUMS Central Library, which I took for 3 years and helped to widen the visibility of more than 20 journals published by TUMS at that time. My previous experience with DARU proved to be instrumental for the library and information management job. I managed to set up online submission and editorial management for all TUMS journals, which allowed the journals to be published on time. My editorial colleagues were offered educational workshops on science editing and biomedical journalism. The strong foundation of biomedical science editing in TUMS eventually was transformed into a highly prestigious editing job and the publication of more than 40 fully peer-reviewed, open-access journals, most archived by PubMed Central and indexed by Web of Science databases.

Since 2010, I've been also working as an associate editor of the *Encyclopedia of Toxicology*, one of the major textbooks published by Elsevier. As a book editor, I have been cooperating with leading authors in the field, who generously shared their scientific knowledge and experience from various parts of the world.

With the experience I have gained in editing, I am committed to pursuing new scientific goals and continuing



to cooperate with scientists from diverse professional and linguistic backgrounds, a prerequisite of intellectually enriching and successful editorial work.

My strong belief is that an editor should act as a judge. Honesty and wisdom have to be the main characteristics of such an editor. Chief editors have to rely on teamwork. They should always be considerate in their responses to the letters and requests from authors, reviewers, and editors. No need to rush to quick conclusions. Sometimes it takes time to make a correct decision, satisfying all players involved in publishing. Based on my experience, reviewers are not always correct in their comments and recommendations. Some may even produce erroneous comments, disorienting the authors. Some expert reviewers are reluctant to accept fresh ideas and to pave the way for new directions in research. They may also reject rational ideas and delay publication of their rival's papers. A responsible editor should be well aware of the abuses of peer review and take fair decisions, favouring science and not the interests of certain experts or research groups. Publishers in turn should regularly evaluate the activities of their editors and reviewers.

As a researcher and author, I have also witnessed mistakes and biases of peer review. Biases stem from the unfairness of some reviewers and editors. Even worse, some editors are unaware of what is going on in their journals. They tend to cause major delays by unduly lengthening the peer review process, wasting the authors' precious time.

As a research supervisor, I always encourage students to report and properly comment both positive and negative results. I have learned that references in the first draft of a paper should be cited in the text in the Harvard style to let the first reader (ie supervisor) properly validate each sentence linked to a certain reference. Students may incorrectly cite sources, write incomprehensible sentences and paragraphs, or even commit plagiarism by copy-paste writing and ignoring quotation rules when large chunks of the published texts are cited without proper paraphrasing. I always read my students' initial writings and edit their papers.

Throughout my editing career, I have not had someone supervising my work or educating me on how to properly edit a scientific work. The most inspiring experience was with my first publication. When I submitted my first paper to a journal in 1989, the editor thoroughly reviewed it, gave a positive response and remarked that someday I would become a great author. Since then, I've been exposed to many reviewers and editors, submitted and managed to publish hundreds of good papers. Through trial and error I have eventually got to a level viewed by most as expert.

I did not volunteer to take up my current editorial posts. I was invited to work as an editor. However, I still consider my main achievements as being related to my roles as an author. A good editor first and foremost must be a good author with a good publication record, have experience in writing different types of articles and communicating with authors, reviewers and editors from diverse backgrounds.

The editorial work boosts my confidence as an educator of students with different levels of knowledge and helps me to be a fair judge in different circumstances in my life and academic work.

Regular journal club meetings with critical reading of journal articles are essential for postgraduate education. In my capacity as the dean of our department I set up a journal club for postgraduate students, and suggested the use of publications from many local journals as educational tools. Most students broadened their biomedical thinking and proposed new research ideas and rational solutions.

My experience suggests that some chief editors of journals are senior scientists who are not appropriately skilled in computer programs and science editing. They lack full knowledge of online databases, literature search engines, and the vast opportunities of the Internet. There are still biomedical experts relying on PubMed searches only, ignoring information stored in SciVerse/Scopus, Thomson Reuters, and many other indexing and abstracting services. The launch of Google in 2004 revolutionised the literature search, and I benefited from that a lot. By searching through some local or regional databases, editors and reviewers can identify duplicate or plagiarised papers not visible in PubMed and Scopus. Also, editors have to be skilled to perform comprehensive literature searches and to find the best reviewers. Publishers should digitalise editorial management and help the editors to use PubMed along with Scopus, Scirus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases.

I joined the Committee of Publication Ethics (COPE) and the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) many years ago. WAME offers an e-discussion forum, useful to many editors. COPE has many flowcharts which I use on occasions of inappropriately handled papers. I joined the European Association of Science Editors (EASE) in 2011 to contribute to and further benefit from its journal, triennial congress, and guidelines for authors. I would like to see the EASE website more functional and e-discussion distributed by emails. I find the European Science Editing journal useful for me and other members of EASE. It has many interesting sections, of which I would like to mention *My Life as an Editor*, presenting life-time experience of distinguished editors!

I believe the quality of the journals could be further improved by publishing more critical editorial commentaries and letters. Editorial board members, particularly big names in their field, should be encouraged and incentivised to contribute more actively to the journal's quality by writing editorials and submitting their best papers. The post of the chief editor should be a scientific and regularly paid position.

I would advise editors to be more active, honest with colleagues, wise, and on-time in their decisions. Do not rush into decisions, unless you are sure these are well-thought out and contribute to the quality of your journals. Be polite towards authors. Identify your best authors and reviewers. Try your best to upgrade your language and digital communication skills, and regularly attend workshops on journalism, science editing and ethical publishing.