

**Publications Committee 2006–2009***Chief editor*

Moira Johnson-Vekony  
europeansciencediting@googlemail.com

*Production manager*

Margaret Cooter  
mcooter@bmj.com

*Secretary*

Sheila Evered secretary@ease.org.uk

**European Science Editing***Articles*

Stuart Handysides  
stuart\_handysides@hotmail.com

All original articles will be peer reviewed

*Editing around the world*

Dario Sambunjak  
dario.sambunjak@mef.hr

*Viewpoints and Book reviews*

Moira Johnson-Vekony  
europeansciencediting@googlemail.com

*From the literature*

Liz Wager  
liz@sideview.demon.co.uk

*Reports of meetings*

Sharon Davies  
sdavies@bmj.com

*EASE-Forum digest*

Elise Langdon-Neuner  
langdoe@baxter.com

*Web Watch*

Colin Batchelor  
BatchelorC@rsc.org

*News notes*

Richard Hurley  
rhurley@bmj.com

*Editor's bookshelf*

Paola De Castro (coordinator)  
paola.decastro@iss.it

*Production assistance*

Penny Hubbard  
pennyhubbard@gmail.com

**Books (Handbook)**

Moira Johnson-Vekony  
europeansciencediting@googlemail.com

**Website**

Emma Campbell  
mailto:emma\_c@yahoo.co.uk

**EASE Council**

Arjan K S Polderman (*ex officio*)

Contributions for the journal should be sent to the Chief Editor or the appropriate section editor listed above. See the Instructions to Authors on EASE's website ([www.ease.org.uk](http://www.ease.org.uk)).

The journal is published in February, May, August and November, free to paid-up members of EASE and available on annual subscription of £60 to libraries and other non-members.

*Disclaimer:* The views expressed by contributors are their own. The Association does not necessarily endorse the claims of advertisers.

ISSN 0258-3127

Printed by MPG Impressions, Chessington,  
Surrey GB-KT9 2NY ©EASE 2008

---

## From the Editors' Desks

---

**Ghost writers and good publication practice**

"Guest authors" are a problem in medical publishing, but does this apply in other scientific fields? See page 99 for your chance to have your say on good publication practices.

**Register of training courses**

EASE would like to raise the profile of teaching already given by many of our members – see page 122 for how to join this register.

**BELS examination**

As usual, BELS will be holding their exam during EASE's conference in Pisa next year. It will take place during the afternoon of Thursday 17 September 2009.

**Visiting the website**

During September 2008, 842 people visited the EASE website from 70 different countries. The majority of visitors were from Europe, North America and China. After the homepage, the most popular pages were the EASE Conference, jobs, journal and Science Editors' Handbook pages.

**Membership rates for 2009**

Membership rates will remain the same next year, the full membership rate being £70, and retired people over 60 and students paying the

reduced rate of £35. Don't forget there is also a special rate of £47 for members of sister organisations if you can form a group of at least 10. An added bonus for next year is the reduced registration fee that EASE members pay to attend our conference in Pisa in September.

**ESE subscription**

For those who only subscribe to European Science Editing (without being members of EASE), the rate will be going up to £60 next year.

**Association of Earth Science Editors (AESE)**

Are there any members of EASE who are also members of AESE – we are looking for someone to liaise between the two societies. Any volunteers?

**Editors' bookshelves**

Help us brighten the Editor's Bookshelf section by sending along a photo of your own editing bookshelf. This issue contains some samples; we'd love to see bookshelves from around the world.

**Contributions for next issue**

The copy date for the February issue is 15 December. Please send contributions to the appropriate member of the publications committee (see the list on the left) by then.

---

**EASE Council 2006–2009**

**President:** Arjan K S Polderman, Pharmaceutisch Weekblad, PO Box 30460, 2500 GL The Hague, The Netherlands; a.k.s.polderman@pw.nl

**Vice-Presidents:** Linus Svensson, Sweden; Joan Marsh, UK

**Members:** Eva Baranyiová, Czech Republic; Alison Clayson, France; Ricardo Guerrero, Spain; Mare-Anne Laane, Estonia; Volodymyr Lysenko, Ukraine and USA; Reme Melero, Spain; Mercè Piqueras, Spain; Witold Zuchiewicz, Poland; Moira Johnson-Vekony, UK (*ex officio*)

**Past-President:** Elisabeth Kessler, Sweden

**Treasurer and Company Secretary:** Roderick Hunt, UK

**Secretary:** Sheila Evered, EASE, PO Box 6159, Reading, RG19 9DE, UK; tel +44 (0)118 970 0322; email secretary@ease.org.uk

**EASE website:** [www.ease.org.uk](http://www.ease.org.uk)

Correspondence about EASE and applications for membership (see website) should go to the Secretary.

---

---

## Editorial

---

### European science editors – who are we?

As a new member of the publications committee I was curious to know how many members the European Association of Science Editors (EASE) had, who and where they were, and what journals they represented. I spent wet days this August analyzing membership statistics and reading old issues of *European Science Editing*. As the trends emerged I found that current concerns about the role of editors in the publishing business had been expressed for many years: “The future of scientific journals is under threat: libraries have to cut subscriptions, selling the journals becomes problematic, and sponsors are difficult to find,” wrote the president of the EASE Council in 1993.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, a year later the hope was expressed that EASE would soon welcome its 1000th member.<sup>2</sup> From the Editors’ Desks provided periodic updates on membership and encouragement to recruit.

In 1998 a membership list showed that EASE had 930 members (including 53 corporate members, representing 346 individuals). Members were from 50 countries, 23 of them in Europe. The largest numbers of members were from the United Kingdom (320), the Netherlands (84), the United States (62), and France (48). The sex of members was not stated, but for those whose names allowed me (with my limited recognition) to determine sex, women outnumbered men by 374 to 342. A total of 403 journals/series were represented.

Three years later, in 2001, little had changed. The membership list included 929 members (again 53 corporate members, representing 346 individuals). Members were from 54 countries, 26 of them in Europe. UK membership still accounted for the largest number (321), followed by the Netherlands (79), Sweden (55), and France and the United States (50 each). The sex of members was not stated: women appeared to outnumber men by 389 to 342. 377 journals/series were represented, over half of them concerned with medical sciences, but with substantial representation from physical sciences, zoology, botany, social sciences, agriculture, veterinary medicine, and palaeontology.

An electronic membership list in 2002 included members from 54 countries, representing 373 journals/series. By the end of 2004 membership had fallen to 807 and further declines occurred associated with internal administrative difficulties. An editorial in 2006 lauded the “enthusiastic and competent members” of EASE, but spoke of the need to attract more.<sup>3</sup>

The year 2007 concluded with 519 members, and as of 21 July 2008, 557 people are paid-up members (342 individual members and 24 corporate members representing 215 individuals); 18 members are sponsored by other members. Members currently represent 42 countries, 25 in Europe. The UK still accounts for the largest number (233), followed by the Netherlands (43), Finland (28), and the United States (26). Women appear to outnumber men by 250 to 241.

The past 10 years have seen a fall in membership numbers, both individual and corporate, with total members having fallen from 930 to 557 (a 40% fall) and individual members from 584 to 342 (41%), and 24 rather than 53 corporate bodies (55%) supplying 215 rather than 346 individual members (38%). The decline in membership is, thus, approximately evenly spread between individuals and corporate bodies, but the number of corporate bodies subscribing has fallen by a larger proportion. The decline is also reflected in membership from fewer countries than before.

The latest data show an increase in membership, and the quality of developments in the EASE website, this journal, the vigour of the online ease-forum, and the meetings organised by EASE suggest a thriving organisation.

The fall in corporate membership may parallel a trend toward leaner organisations, in which subscriptions to journals and societies are common casualties. That individual subscriptions have declined may suggest a similar trend in individual behaviour. Is membership of organisations becoming less popular as information and interaction become more readily and freely available on the internet? What is happening to other organisations that members belong to?

Is the tendency towards early, electronic publication reducing the role of editors in scientific publishing? Is the scientific editor a dying breed? Are journals going the way of retailers, who “pile them high and sell them cheap”? The pages of this journal illustrate the continuing need for editors, both to help authors present their data and interpretations clearly and to prevent the perpetration of fraud, and draw our attention to the wealth of interest in our business in terms of websites, publications, and conferences.

Our membership numbers have some way to go to reach the 1000 to which Hervé Maisonneuve aspired in 1994,<sup>2</sup> but the current trend is upward. EASE is a lean and fit organisation, but all organisations need feeding. Organisations are nourished by the intellectual food brought to them by their members. Perhaps the prospect of next year’s conference in Pisa is a good time to invite our colleagues to sit at our table.

**Stuart Handysides**

stuart\_handysides@hotmail.com

#### References

1. Fogelberg P. The editor’s position during times of financial recession, and the role of EASE. *European Science Editing* 1993;(50):2.
2. Maisonneuve H. Will EASE soon welcome member number 1000? *European Science Editing* 1994;(52):2.
3. Polderman A. The face of EASE. *European Science Editing* 2006;32(4):93.

---

## Articles

---

### Let them write English

**Elise Langdon-Neuner**

*Baxter BioScience, Wagramer Strasse 17-19, A-1220 Vienna, Austria; langdoe@baxter.com*

*This article was first published in Revista do Colégio Brasileiro de Cirurgiões 2007;34(4).*

This article discusses the current requirement for scientific research to be published in the English language and the problems arising from this requirement not only for authors whose first language is not English but also for society and for the world's scientific community. The assistance which is, and should be, available to authors is considered, as well as a future looking towards multilingual publication.

The harsh words "Let them eat cake" is the response attributed to Marie-Antoinette (1755-1793), the Queen consort of Louis XVI, when she was told that the French populace had no bread to eat. At this time French was perhaps the most important language of science. Marie-Antoinette was later guillotined by the French populace. A lack of understanding of the difficulties faced by others does not apparently always serve oneself – something to be kept in mind when considering the demands for publication in English as the current language of science.

In 1995 there were an estimated 1113 million native speakers of Chinese and 372 million native speakers of English. Currently the number of Chinese native speakers is set to increase while that of English native speakers is set to decrease. By 2050 English is forecast to have slipped to position four on the list of numbers of native speakers between the ages of 15 and 24 years, with Spanish in a close fifth place and Portuguese in a not so close sixth place. Chinese will remain number one, Hindi/Urdu will move into position two and Arabic into position three.<sup>1</sup>

The United Kingdom recently imported 100 Mandarin teachers directly from China to meet the growing demand from pupils to learn a language that they believe holds the key to future global prosperity.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless from today's viewpoint English is well established as the language of science and it is difficult to imagine how Chinese, with its script, could dislodge it.

Whether they like it or not, scientists who do not publish their work in English exclude their work from the world's pool of knowledge, cut themselves off from discourse with fellow scientists internationally and run the risk that their careers in their own country will be stunted. Increasingly scientists' institutions and grant authorities throughout the world judge scientists' performance on their publications in Science Citation Indexed journals, few of which are published in languages other than English.

Language, however, is not just a problem for the scientist alone. Progress in science throughout the world is hindered when research conducted in countries where English is not

the native language is excluded from the pool of scientific knowledge. Only one-tenth of scientific journals published in Eastern Europe are published in English.<sup>3</sup> Russia is one of the world's leaders in per capita number of doctors and scientists, yet its literature is largely inaccessible to the rest of the world.

Authors whose first language is not English therefore need to publish in English. To do this they can either learn English and pay an author's editor to check the English because, as discussed later, they rarely feel confident enough in English or, if they do, journals will ask them to have their English checked anyway; or they can write in their own language and pay a translator.

These authors should be supported in their efforts to contribute to the world's resource of scientific knowledge by their own institutions, grant agencies and governments; organisations funded by the international scientific community; and biomedical journals.

#### Learning English

The ease with which a scientist learns English depends on the attitude of the culture he or she grows up in. In small countries where the native language is primarily only spoken by inhabitants of that country, eg in Finland, there is a stronger incentive to learn English. This is reinforced by exposure to English television and films that have subtitles in the native language rather than being dubbed into that language, and by higher education often being conducted in English.

However, the number of people speaking the native language is not the only factor. History is another. In India schools that teach in English are favoured and many speakers of Hindi are growing up speaking English. Where English has not been taught in schools, e.g. in Eastern Europe during the communist era, the current generation is especially disadvantaged.

Learning English as a second language might not always be enough. Ulrich Ammon, professor of German linguistics at the University of Duisburg, is quoted as saying, "No one German is entirely comfortable speaking and writing in English".<sup>4</sup> I can verify this from my experience working with Austrian scientists. Austrians have a positive attitude towards learning languages. Job prospects are believed to be greatly enhanced if you can speak English fluently and in addition have a good working knowledge of a second foreign language. Nevertheless authors feel more comfortable when an author's editor checks manuscripts they have written in English. Korean researchers and

engineers who had learnt English and worked in the UK have said they miss more than 50% of what they hear during discussions with fellow experts.<sup>4</sup> The move in Japan for science societies to hold their meetings in English has also been criticized because participants are less active than when discussions are held in Japanese.<sup>4</sup>

John Benfield, an Austrian-born American editor and professor of thoracic surgery at the University of California at Los Angeles, studied 50 consecutive manuscripts about lung cancer that came from authors whose first language was not English. This study included comments and all correspondence between the editor and authors.<sup>5</sup> He has also given courses on manuscript writing in the United States, Japan and China jointly with an English language professional, Christine Feak, from the University of Michigan.

Benfield is convinced that authors whose first language is not English are disadvantaged by an inability to say what they want to say in English as well as a native speaker of English would say it, or as well as they could say it in their own language. The disadvantage is particularly great when addressing controversial matters or subtleties (John Benfield, personal communication, June 2007).

I believe that people who are not native speakers of English – and sometimes those who are – may not always fully appreciate the nuances of a particular word they use. For instance, when it comes to protecting its industry the US pays great attention to words. Objections were raised by the US delegation to the word “code” at a recent World Health Assembly. A resolution had called for a “code” to promote responsible marketing of foods and beverages to children. The US delegates objected to the word “code” and proposed the phrase “a set of recommendations”. Their objection to “code” was that they felt it could be construed as being binding.<sup>6</sup>

Pharmaceutical companies pay marketing agencies large sums of money to come up with brand phrases for their products that will appear in all their promotional material for that product, including articles published in biomedical journals. The subtleties of these phrases need to be fully understood by researchers who approve and put their names to the articles.

Far-reaching questions can arise when all scientists are forced to use English. Many Dutch university courses are now taught in English for the benefit of the foreign students that Holland attracts and is keen to attract. Literacy in English is high in Holland, but even so, teaching science in English puts an extra burden not only on Dutch students but also on professors because they cannot be as free and creative in a second language as in their first language, and they often have to oversimplify.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, when people regard their own language as inferior to the majority language they stop using it. This statement, made in the context of projections that half of the world’s estimated 5000-7000 languages will be lost by the end of this century,<sup>8</sup> also applies to science. Finnish academics are reported to contend that if university research focuses exclusively on the use of English, their own language will lose its ability to depict new concepts

and phenomena and their subtle differences.<sup>4</sup>

Education in English has disadvantages for society too. Only the good scientific brains from the class that can afford such education will be captured, leaving untapped the good scientific brains from the pool of people who have not been so privileged.

A communication rift also arises in conveying science to practitioners and the general public. Review articles and articles informing professionals about new developments in their field are preferable in the native language of those readers, likewise information and news read by the general public. Health care is purportedly the most searched subject on the internet. A new field where native language is important is that of “knowledge translation”. The aim here is to bridge the so called know-do gap and get research results transformed into policies and practice. Putting knowledge into practice requires adapting it to local culture, and language is a key element of this (Hooman Momen, personal communication, June 2007).

As long as English remains the world language of business and science, bilingual education in state schools from primary education onwards, as my children have experienced, would appear to be a solution. To date there are still only very few schools even in Austria that have taken this route. From the state’s view, the cost of having two teachers in the classroom for every subject has to be balanced against that of teaching English for a particular purpose, eg science, and of translation. But the cost to the country’s lost progress and development should also be taken into account.

#### **Assistance from authors’ editors and translators**

Authors who write in English can seek the assistance of an authors’ editor to check the text for language errors and polish the writing style to fit that of the journal targeted for publication of the article. The ideal authors’ editor would need to be an English linguist, have a good knowledge of the author’s native language, and understand the science as well. If the author writes in his or her first language for publication in English, likewise the ideal translator sought by the author should not only be qualified to translate between the languages but would also need to be trained in the science.

Multitalented people are rare and expensive, as is the alternative of two experts helping the author and working together, one on the language side and the other on the science side. However, such joint efforts have been found to yield better scientific reporting than peer editing or language professional editing alone.<sup>9-12</sup> The new European guidelines drawn up by the European Committee of Standardisation state that translations should optimally be reviewed by a specialist in the field, eg a physician for a biomedical translation ([www.lisa.org/globalizationinsider/2005/04/the\\_en15038\\_eur.html](http://www.lisa.org/globalizationinsider/2005/04/the_en15038_eur.html)).

One thing that should not be forgotten is that translators and editors introduce their own subjectivity. The content and emphasis of a translation cannot be assumed to be the same as that of the original, just as the claim that editing is merely helping authors say what they mean is not

reliable. A study of abstracts written in French, translated into English by two French authors and then edited by two English native speakers, found the editors imposed their own styles of writing and changed the original meaning in different ways. Furthermore readers recognized the abstracts as having different “voices”.<sup>13</sup>

### Who pays for courses and assistance?

Authors can be helped by their institutions setting aside funds for courses to improve their English. For example a new medical curriculum was approved in Serbia in 2004, in which medical students are required to take two compulsory courses in medical English and are also given the opportunity to attend three elective courses.

Tuition, however, needs to extend beyond English. Editors of the *Croatian Medical Journal (CMJ)* have found that language is not the main problem with manuscripts submitted to their journal, which is published in English. Authors also need training in planning and performing the study, writing the narrative, and scientific reporting style. The *CMJ* has been running courses for physicians and postgraduate students covering these aspects as well as English language since December 2007.

Sometimes fees paid to translators or authors' editors are met by the scientist's institution or from research grants, but very often scientists have to pay themselves. Scientists' institutions or grant agencies could support authors by meeting the cost of author's editors or translators and by establishing links with high quality suppliers. When I asked for information on the European Science Editors Association (EASE) online forum the replies gave the impression that the number of commercial organisations offering manuscript services have mushroomed over the past few years, especially in Eastern European countries such as Hungary. From Poland the warning came that it is usually not easy to find a good translator specialising in one's field, while non-specialist translators do not understand the text and make many mistakes. Authors everywhere should carefully scrutinize the qualifications of service providers and the quality of the work they produce.

Gradually the international scientific community is obliging with programmes of assistance. Examples of programmes financed by the international community to help authors include the AuthorAID project.<sup>14</sup> In this project authors whose native language is English mentor and assist authors in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe with writing their papers. The project differs from international research collaborations, where assistance comes from coauthors who also need to look after their own interests. Another example of a programme that helps authors in developing countries is run by the International Network for Cancer Treatment and Research ([www.inctr.be](http://www.inctr.be)) and financed by the US National Cancer Institute.

### The attitude of biomedical journals

Authors whose first language is not English but who write in English often believe that their manuscripts are less likely to be accepted by biomedical journals. However, data from the *Annals of Thoracic Surgery* indicate that the

disadvantage is not in the incidence of ultimate publication but rather in the need to revise manuscripts.<sup>5</sup> Likewise a study in *Cardiovascular Research* which sought to pinpoint language area problems that could affect the possibility of sound medical work being rejected found that poor writing was unlikely to result in outright rejection but that it may influence the overall impression of the work.<sup>15</sup>

Certainly journals often ask authors to have their manuscripts checked for English if the corresponding author is located in a country where English is not the native language. Such requests are helpful if the language problems are specified, but frequently the request is a standard response to the corresponding author's address. An example was given by a Spanish author who complained in a letter to *Nature* that almost all referee comments he received mentioned style. He asked a friend, who was a professor at Oxford University in the UK, to check his manuscript. The friend had published over 250 papers himself and was editor-in-chief of a reputed journal. However, even after his check one referee, without identifying errors, still demanded that the manuscript be revised by a native English speaker. The Spanish author suggested in his letter to *Nature* that an institute of correct English style should be established to which authors could send their manuscripts. The institute could correct the paper and certify its compliance to an accepted language standard.<sup>16</sup>

The *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* publishes articles in English with abstracts in English, French, Spanish and Arabic (eg <http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/85/5/06-038521.pdf>). Hooman Momen, editor of the bulletin, believes that journals could be more sensitive to the needs of authors whose first language is not English. For example, they could encourage authors to use standard phrases in the materials and methods, and results sections (without risking accusations of plagiarism), perhaps even compiling glossaries of appropriate phrases and terms for their speciality. Journals which have the resources of internal editors could also accept the discussion section in bullet point format and create the text for the author (Hooman Momen, personal communication, June 2007). The website of the World Health Organization (WHO) can be viewed in six languages (<http://www.who.int/>) and the organization has shown its concern that research from all countries in the world should be published and understood by its commitment to multilingualism. A plan of action on multilingualism has recently been approved by the WHO ([http://www.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf\\_files/EB121/B121\\_6-en.pdf](http://www.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/EB121/B121_6-en.pdf)). The United Nations' General Assembly also recently passed a resolution on multilingualism (A/61/L.56 on 9 May 2007) and proclaimed 2008 “The International Year of Languages”.

Large commercial English language journals such as the *BMJ* (British Medical Journal), *Lancet*, *JAMA* (the journal of the American Medical Association), and *Journal of the American Dental Association* have been publishing editions translated into other languages for some years now. Moreover, in the last few years a new trend of cover-to-cover translation of journals originally published in

languages other than English has developed. Mary Ellen Kerans, who heads the team of translators that translates *Archivos de Bronchoneumologia* from Spanish into English, explained in response to my EASE forum request that the purpose of bilingual publication of science is to bring a whole community of scientists closer to the centre of discourse and at the same time reinforce autochthonous language scientific activity. Higher education in that language is thereby strengthened, in contrast to the weakening wrought by using English to teach science and medicine in countries like Holland.

Brazil is one of the countries at the forefront of bilingual publication. Two approaches are being encouraged. In one, the print version of the journal is published in Portuguese only, but the online version is published in both Portuguese and English (eg *Jornal Vascular Brasileiro* and *Revista de Psiquiatria do Rio Grande do Sul*). In the other, both the printed and the online version have bilingual content (eg *Jornal de Pediatria*). Bilingual publication is currently limited by the considerable financial resources it requires, but in the future this expenditure might be relieved by improved translation software.

### Translation software

To date, no translation software that substitutes for a human translator exists. The software is only an assistance to the human translator.

Computer-assisted translation (CAT) and machine translation (MT) need to be distinguished. CAT is a searchable corpus of validated translations which a human translator uses to produce translations from idiosyncratic texts such as those found in research manuscripts. With MT a draft is produced electronically, which a human translator brings up to publication standard by making sure terminology is accurate and style is followed.

MT is more suited to structured and standardized phrases and terms, which is a reason for Hooman Momen's suggestion that journals use standard phrases in the materials and methods and results sections. There are some free MT tools (such as Babel Fish – see <http://babelfish.altavista.com/>). Google have also recently announced a new translation service ([http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/business/316982\\_googletranslation24.html](http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/business/316982_googletranslation24.html)).

When the progress in computer software over the last 20 years is considered, it is not hard to imagine that translation software could be developed in the not too distant future to such a quality as to require little intervention by human translators. Multilingual publication would then become more affordable.

### Conclusion

The current hegemony of English as the language of science places authors who do not speak English as a first language at a disadvantage. This disadvantage can be alleviated by training in scientific English, together with instruction on writing scientific manuscripts. Authors' editors and translators can also be of assistance. A good approach is for two native speakers of English to check a manuscript: an

expert in English linguistics and an expert in the particular scientific field. Journals could also be more helpful to authors whose first language is not English.

Costs of training, editing, and translation services should be met by the author's institution or funding agency to enable the research to become part of the international pool of scientific knowledge. Some international organisations also provide support.

Learning English and the use of authors' editors or translators are not guarantees that the subtleties of meanings are correctly transferred from the original language into English. Particular care is needed if the authors' editor or translator is being paid by a party with a vested interest in the research.

Despite the current international use of English to converse in science, other languages should not be excluded from science. Higher education solely in English can lead to a loss of ability to express new concepts and phenomena in the native language. Languages carry their culture with them, and a hegemony of one language excludes a cultural diversity of attitude and thought that is critical to science.

Furthermore, it is important to convey science to professionals and the general public in their native tongue. Bilingual education from an early age could be an ideal solution, but it is still rare in practice. There is a new trend of cover-to-cover translation of medical journals from the original language into English, but it is still expensive. Development of translation software may reduce cost in the future.

The WHO has shown its dedication to multilingual publication by its recent approval of a plan on multilingualism. Hopefully the year of international languages will increase awareness of the problems surrounding communication of science and will promote a unified effort to pool world scientific knowledge in such a way as to preserve language and cultural diversity but at the same time ease accessibility for all.

I would like to thank the following contributors to the EASE forum for information they provided for this article: John Benfield, Mary Ellen Kerans, Sywia Ulfalska, Elisabeth Heseltine, James Hartley, Yateen Josh, Lorna O'Brien, Carol Norris, and Harvey Shenker. My thanks also to Hooman Momen, Franioise Salager-Meyer, and Claudia Buchweitz.

### References

1. Graddol D. The future of language. *Science* 2004;303: 1329–1331.
2. Frean A. 100 teachers imported from China. *The Times* 24 May 2007.
3. Lysenko V. Inaccessible science literature in Eastern Europe. *European Science Editing* 2007;33(1):10–12.
4. Lee L, Madeleine B. Lost in translation. *Nature* 2007;445:4545.
5. Benfield JR, Howard KM. The language of science. *European Journal of Cardiothorac Surgery* 2000;18(6):642–648.
6. Glusker A. Assembly gets into wrangle over junk food warning. *BMJ* 2007;334:1130.
7. Vasconcelos SMR, Wu W, Ivanis A, Hull E, Handjani F,

- Barron JP, Salager-Meyer F. Around the world: teaching medical writing to doctors and scientists. *The Write Stuff* 2007;16(1):12–15.
8. Gibbs WW. Savings languages. *Scientific American* 2002;(August):63–69.
  9. Parkhurst C. The composition process of science writers. *English for Specific Purposes* 1990:169–179.
  10. Flowerdew J. Attitudes of journal editors to nonnative speaker contributions. *TESOL Quarterly* 2001;35:121–150.
  11. Benfield JR. English for Chinese cardiothoracic surgeons. In: Wan S and Yim APC, eds. *Cardiothoracic surgery in China: past, present and future*. ShaTin, Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2007: 507–519.
  12. Benfield JR. Cardiothoracic surgeons divided by a common language. *Annals Thoracic Surgery* in press.
  13. Hartley J, Branthwaite A, Ganier F, Heurley L. Lost in translation: contributions of editors to the meanings of text. *Journal of Information Science* Published Online 10 April 2007, doi: 10.1177/0165551506076392.
  14. Robbins A, Freeman P. AuthorAID: developmental editing assistance for researchers in developing countries. *European Science Editing* 2007;;33(1):9–10.
  15. Coates R, Sturgeon B, Bohannon J, Pasini E. Language and publication in Cardiovascular Research articles. *Cardiovascular Research* 2002;53:279–285.
  16. Herrera AJ. Language bias discredits the peer-review system [letter]. *Nature* 1999;397:467.

## Good Publication Practice – call for help

A call, as in “call for papers”; not a cry. About a decade ago, a team of editors led by Elizabeth Wager compiled a set of guidelines for Good Publication Practice. These are aimed primarily at people publishing clinical or preclinical information, especially when this information has been gathered, analysed, or written with support from a pharmaceutical, biotech, or medical device company.

Things have moved on, and while the need for guidelines is still there, the details have changed, so the International Society for Medical Publication Professionals (ISMPP) has launched GPP2. This will be led by Chris Graf of Wiley-Blackwell, who is co-chair of the ISMPP Standards & Best Practices Committee and Elizabeth (Betts) Field of Field Advantage Medical Communications. According to Chris, GPP2 will follow the mission laid out by the original GPP authors and “encourage responsible and ethical publication of the results of clinical trials sponsored by pharmaceutical companies”.<sup>1</sup> Like its predecessor, GPP2 will deliver “best practice” ethical guidance about peer-reviewed publications and presentations at scientific meetings, as well as recommendations for “non-peer-reviewed scientific communications”. New sections will provide guidance on recent developments in medical research and reporting, such as clinical trial registration and results disclosure.

They would like your help. They are looking for people

to comment on the first draft of the new guidelines, which will be available towards this end of this year.

If you would like to participate and have at least 10 years’ experience in three of the areas listed below, then please contact Chris.

- Setting publication policies in commercial organizations
- Design, conduct, and reporting of clinical trials
- Legal and regulatory requirements on conducting, registering, and reporting clinical trials publications as part of a clinical development programme
- Common editorial and journal practices, including peer review
- Scientific or medical writing and editing

### Contribute to GPP2

Contact Chris Graf by email: [chris.graf@wiley.com](mailto:chris.graf@wiley.com) or phone: +44 1865 476 393

1. Wager E, Field E, Grossman L. Good publication practice for pharmaceutical companies. *Current Medical Research Opinion* 2003;19:149–154.

## Beyond medicine

Do the questions raised above concerning Good Publication Practice relate solely to medicine and particularly to clinical research, or are they relevant to other subject areas? In our discussions of the call for participation, Elise Langdon-Neuner raised the questions of ghost writing and guest authorship. These are addressed in the guidelines issued by the International Council of Medical Journal Editors. Ghost writing may be a problem that most people see as confined to medicine, but is this true? Do editors working in other fields come across papers written by paid professionals

who are not listed as authors? And guest authorship is common to all disciplines in the sense that it may occur in all disciplines. How common is it in the sense of frequent? Feedback on this would be useful, either via the EASE Forum or by submitting a response to *ESE* itself. It’s a topic that warrants consideration at our conference in Pisa next year and I’ll propose to the Programme Committee that we add a workshop on this. Volunteers to contribute are needed...

**Joan Marsh**  
[jmarsh@wiley.com](mailto:jmarsh@wiley.com)

---

## Viewpoints

---

### A call from a non-native English speaker: don't look at my affiliation

I am writing this article under strong emotion. Just today I have received a review of one of my articles from a science journal; I read there, "The English at present is not at a standard, which allows publishing the manuscript in an international journal. [...] Actually nearly each sentence needs corrections."

My first thought was, "Oh dear, not again... I have not received such comments for two years or even more, I have paid so much attention to learning English, I have read so much, wrote so much, done so much, and despite all those efforts, again?..." Mildly put, I was disheartened, depressed, dejected. Is my writing so bad indeed?

After calming down, however, I recalled an interesting situation I had encountered about three years ago. I wrote an article with three colleagues; two of them were affiliated to my university, and the other one was a well-known overseas scientist, who kindly agreed to support us with his knowledge by discussing the research and editing the article. Worth mentioning is that he was generally acknowledged to be an expert in scientific writing and was an editorial board member of several core journals in our research field. Anyway, we submitted the paper to a very good journal. After some time this colleague let me know he received our article for review with a request for careful checking the language because the editor supposed it was very poor. Politely informing the editor about his co-authorship of this article, he underlined that in his humble opinion nothing was wrong with the language. Of course such mistakes in managing manuscripts happen and this is not the point here; the point is that this person was the co-author of the paper and was acknowledged by the editor to be a language expert, and it was his editing what gave the final shape to the manuscript. Conclusion? The editor was biased against the affiliation to the Polish university, and was unlucky to miss our overseas colleague's name among the co-authors. No matter how much I try, I can't come up with any other clue for the editor's behaviour.

Even if not often, such situations do happen in the science community. Richard Webster, the former editor

of the *European Journal of Soil Science*, from whom many could learn how to write scientific papers, describes a similar situation.<sup>1</sup> He wrote two articles with a group of non-native English scientists. Both these articles were returned to the authors from the journals they were submitted to with the recommendation that they "obtain linguistic help from a native speaker". Though such stories may be funny, it's rather sorrow than enjoyment that fills my heart when I hear them: I know what kind of feeling reading such unfair comments may cause. I don't even want to guess how many non-native English scientists received them.

Of course I am not talking here about articles of which the language is unacceptable. Most of us, non-native English speakers, write poorly and our writing quite often, if not usually, is indeed unacceptable. Nonetheless, even among us one can find scientists who write in good English, at least good enough not to deserve comments like the above; and I am sure even such people receive them sometimes. My main point is that an author affiliating a university or institute from a non-English speaking country always has to be aware that such reviews can and likely will come, no matter how good his or her English is.

I am not saying my language is good or acceptable for scientific journals and that the language of the article in question was not bad. But I hope that the claim that "nearly each sentence needs corrections" is not true in the case of the present article. Just to give you the whole picture of my writing, I requested the Editor-in-Chief of *European Science Editing* not to edit this article before publication, and asked nobody else for comments or editing. Hence any mistakes come from my poor writing skills and do not reflect *European Science Editing's* editing abilities.

**Marcin Kozak**  
nyggus@gmail.com

#### Reference

1. Webster R. Let's re-write the scientific paper. *European Journal of Soil Science* 2003;54,215-218.

---

#### Editor's note

When I received this viewpoint contribution earlier this year, my initial reaction was one of dismay: surely this scenario is exaggerated, or else based upon one or two unfortunate experiences. So, I sent it to two members of the ESE Publications Committee to see what they thought. The response I got was something of a surprise – that yes, things do get rejected out of hand simply because the English is not as polished as it could be. Moreover, one

of these individuals – a highly respected, native English speaking editor – said that she had received comments from a reviewer that one of her papers needed attention to the language!

Far from this being an occasional occurrence, it seems that the excuse of poor English is used as a way of rejecting manuscripts, a handy tool to have in these days of heavy submission loads and the need to "cull" manuscripts before



peer review. This seems a very short-sighted thing to do – to reject something out of hand, that might be very worthy scientifically – simply because the English is less than perfect (of course if the English is so poor as to make the text impossible to understand, then that is a different matter altogether). After all, what are we editors for? One could argue that all authors should (as many of them already do) make use of a native English-speaking editor before submitting any manuscript; this is one of the aspects explored by Langdon-Neuner in the article reprinted in this issue of ESE.

Intrigued by the initial contribution and spurred on by the comments of my colleagues, I decided to investigate a little further by posting a question on the EASE-Forum. How many of the forum members had come across this problem? How had they dealt with it? And what ideas did they have for solving this difficulty?

It was quickly pointed out that the problem could be one of simple prejudice, and that merely having a non-English surname or working in a non-English speaking country could be enough to trigger a rejection justified on the basis of poor English. I therefore followed the first question with a second one concerning name and geographical location. This second foray attracted fewer responses, but those contained some interesting points.

Below are the two questions and some of the responses. If you subscribe to the EASE-Forum you will have seen most of these already. If you don't subscribe, please consider doing so; you would then be able to follow discussions such as these as they happen, and have the opportunity to contribute – the more contributors we have, the more useful the Forum will become.

### The first question

*Dear Forum members, I have received a viewpoint contribution for ESE describing how an author's manuscripts have been rejected based on the apparent poor quality of the English in them – unjustifiably so in the author's opinion. I am interested in finding out how common an issue this is among both the non-native and native English speakers of EASE.*

### The responses

A selection of the responses reveals that there is indeed an issue: some respondents offered their personal experiences, while others pointed the way to useful sources of information. One even suggested that we carry out some testing of the theory that it doesn't matter how excellent the substance of a manuscript – if the English and presentation are not fine-tuned it will fall at the first publication hurdle.

### We should offer support to authors

*From Marge Berer, mberer@rhmjjournal.org.uk*

I regularly receive submissions from people whose first language is not English. Most of them will have obtained the support of a native speaker of English with expertise in their subject, if not (also) a translator, in ensuring their papers are in good English. However, translated papers are notoriously not-quite-English. Such papers almost always

need a substantial amount of copyediting for language (apart from the usual problems with writing that are not restricted to authors whose first language is not English). I give that editing support myself because otherwise my journal would end up with papers primarily from authors from the few English-speaking countries.

If we want to claim our journals are international, I believe we have to live up to what it means as regards language and that implies giving that support. Many journal readers (including peer reviewers and I dare say some editors) may not have the experience of deciphering the quirks of language of non-English-speaking authors, especially if they do not have English as a first language themselves. I taught English as a foreign language for 10 years before I became a journal editor, so I find such deciphering easier, but that's unusual. Even so, I regularly have to ask authors to reword a sentence or a whole paragraph because I just cannot figure out what it means to say. I also regularly have to guess and ask the author whether I'm right.

If the journal(s) to which the author in question has submitted papers are unwilling to give editing support for language, the author needs to get the help of someone else to improve their written English before submitting a paper and while revising. If they disagree with a journal, there is presumably no agreed form of arbitration as to who is right about the accuracy and quality of language.

### Writing for the "real world"

*From Ed Hull, edhull@home.nl*

This thread of opinions touches on a topic close to my heart, and that is how to teach researchers, whether native or non-native English writers, to write for the "real world". I teach scientific writing at various universities in Holland. Although my students have English language problems, most PhD students, as well as other researchers, have more serious problems that cannot be solved by a native-speaking editor or corrector.

Unfortunately, our educational system has not prepared us to write to busy "real world" readers. We learned how to write to teachers, professors, and supervisors. Those readers HAD to read our texts – they were paid to do that. Furthermore, they probably knew at least as much about our topics as we did – they were not looking for new information. Those readers were looking for indications that we had done our homework, that we were smart, that we were proficient in using the jargon and buzzwords, and that we had followed instructions. And one crucial instruction was to "write 3000 words about..."

Well, our first goal was to get 3000 words on paper – long blah-blah sentences worked very well for this. Especially in our language courses, English, Dutch, German or whatever, we learned certain style rules that might apply to thrillers, novels, and science fiction, but certainly do not apply to science or technology. Some of those rules that I remember are: never use the same word twice in a sentence, use synonyms to bring your work to life, paint pictures with your words. And we learned to give our teachers what they were looking for because we wanted to pass the course.

Most of us in science want to achieve much different goals, and our readers are very different. We want to have readers cite our work in a positive way – an indication that we have contributed to science. But real-world readers do not have to read our texts; even worse, they probably do not have time to read them. We are in this strange situation where everyone has to write and publish, but no one has time to read. We have to seduce busy real-world readers into reading our texts. They have to see immediately that an article offers them something they can use in their own work. Just like the old gold diggers, readers of journal articles are searching for easy-to-grab nuggets – credible science that gives them something of value.

In other words, much of what we learned about writing at school does not serve us well in the real world. First of all, I think we need to make a distinction between “academic writing” and “real-world writing”. Documents written at the professional level are NOT just academic exercises – they are meant to add real value in the real world. And, a document only achieves success AFTER a sequence of events: someone sees value in the document, is thereby motivated to continue reading, can then easily read and understand it, finds nuggets he or she can use, and then cites it in his or her own work. PhD students need courses in real-world writing; such courses should be offered by every university.

Journals can also help by including tips on real-world writing in their instructions to authors. Such tips, of course, go much further than layout, active vs passive voice, use of “I” or “we”, etc. Such tips should help authors to show the value of their work, how to turn their messages into nuggets, how to build in credibility, and, in short, how to address real-world readers.

### English as an International Language

From John R Benfield, [j.benfield@verizon.net](mailto:j.benfield@verizon.net)

Born in Austria, educated in the US, and a long time editor, I have a major interest in English as an International Language (EIL) authors (we now prefer that term), prompted by the fact that nearly eight years ago the European Association for Cardiothoracic Surgery asked me to speak about that topic when I was its honoured guest (Benfield JR, Howard K. The language of science. *European Journal of Cardiothoracic Surgery* 2000;18:642–648). I have been extraordinarily fortunate to be able to maintain relationships with first class language professionals.

1. We have evidence, among that group of manuscripts and eventual articles we studied in detail, that manuscripts from EIL authors require more revision, but usually do not suffer a higher eventual rejection rate as compared to articles written by authors fully proficient in English.

2. We have extensive experience, which can be illustrated with many examples, that language professionals and peers (subject experts) bring different skills to EIL authors’ manuscripts.

3. We believe that ideally each article from an EIL author who is not fully proficient in English deserves the attention of a high quality language professional and a peer with specific expertise in the subject of the article.

4. We think that “with privilege comes responsibility” (Benfield JR, Feak CB. *European Science Editing* 2003;29(2):37).

5. Without significant funding, we have presented numerous interactive programs for EIL authors, and we have evidence that they have been effective and written evaluations that indicate their success.

6. We have a well thought out template whereby to address the issue of EIL authors, most recently (January 2007) expressed in writing to a cardiothoracic surgery audience (Benfield JR. *Cardiothoracic surgeons divided by a common language. Annals of Thoracic Surgery* 2007;84(2):363–364) and expressed verbally in February 2008 to the Academic Surgical Congress of the Society of University Surgeons and the Society for Academic Surgeons.

7. We would like to see societies, journal editorial boards, and funding sources come together to develop meaningful, ongoing support systems for EIL authors.

8. The goal is improvement in scientific reporting and dialogue.

### How peer review can improve writing

From Karen Shashok, [kshashok@kshashok.com](mailto:kshashok@kshashok.com)

Problems with the role of peer review in improving “the English” or the writing were analysed in my article in *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, “Content and communication – how can peer review provide helpful feedback about the writing?” (2008,8:3; doi:10.1186/1471-2288-8-3). The reference list may be a useful place to look for research on this topic – which comes mainly from applied linguistics or sociolinguistics. (Since most of their practice is empirically based, STM gatekeepers have yet to realize that there are academic researchers and specific disciplines that do proper research on this.)

Unjustified complaints about “the English” have been a problem for ages. If the grammar or syntax is wrong and the level of proficiency in written English usage is simply too weak to allow the reader to understand the content, then the manuscript cannot really receive a fair review (or “respectful reading” – a phrase Mary Ellen Kerans hit on almost 10 years ago).

But if the writing is correct but different from what the reviewer or other reader expects it to read like, this is another matter. Very often I see reviewers and editors criticize “the English” simply because of “style” or taste differences, not because they found it hard to understand the actual messages.

A further issue is when the gatekeeper’s own proficiency in English is weaker than he or she assumes (or is outmoded), but the gatekeeper nevertheless criticizes correct English writing for faults that are absent.

Editors have begun to admit that problems with “the English” can lead to rejection even if the scientific content of a manuscript is strong. There is so much competition for publication now (and reviewers willing to donate a lot of time for heavy editing are on the way to extinction) that gatekeepers can afford to simply reject manuscripts that would use up “too much” of their limited resources (time or money) for editing.

### Some justification

From Stuart Handysides, *stuart\_handysides@hotmail.com*

Editors have to offer reasons for rejection. If the author's use of the editor's language does not enable the editor to follow the argument then there is no alternative but to reject.

Having had to assess and edit articles in English written both by native English speakers and by those for whom English is a second language, I have observed that coherence and elegance are not necessarily greater in articles written by native speakers of the language.

### Words of encouragement

From Natasha Cohen, *tashalouiza@gmail.com*

*Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* has an (unofficial) policy of never rejecting a paper solely on the quality of the English. Where a badly-written paper contains publishable material, our editors always go back to the author with a request for revision, usually including guidance on a company or companies specializing in editing STM papers. We feel it is unethical to reject manuscripts purely because of language difficulties – after all, the majority of us would not be able to write anything at all in a foreign language!

### An opportunity to do some research

From Yateen Joshi, *yateendra.joshi@gmail.com*

Let the author send you several manuscripts that were rejected because the author did not meet the standards of English expected of him or her by the journal.

Take a few 250-word excerpts from these manuscripts and add a few more excerpts from other published papers that were accepted without the issue of the standard of English being raised; doctor them to remove any obvious pointers; and put up all the excerpts on a website.

Invite EASE members to visit the website and assign the excerpts to any of the three categories: (a) acceptable without copyediting for language; (b) requires copyediting to improve the standard of English; (c) can't say.

This will at least yield some hard evidence provided the test yields statistically valid data.

### The second question

*As a follow up to my post a few weeks ago, here is another one. It was pointed out to me that I may have posed the wrong question.*

*Perhaps the question should have been this: 'What happens if you submit a manuscript as an "apparently non-native English author", perhaps because your name is foreign (as is mine), or because you have a non-UK email address or work as an ex-pat. Are you then judged harshly because you are perceived as non-native even before anyone has taken the time and effort read your text?'*

*Does anyone have any interesting experiences to share?*

### Positive news

From Margaret Corbett, *mcorbett@ntlworld.com*

In my (rather small) experience, the reverse is the case, with lenient judging because authors from other countries should have a fair chance of having their papers published.

### What's in a name?

From Kersti Wagstaff, *kersti.wagstaff@sfeep.net*

Speaking only as a copy editor, I suspend judgement on readability until I have started to read the paper. There are so many native-born Americans with "foreign" names, so many "foreigners" who have spent years in the USA or UK and whose written English is fluent, so many other foreigners who get hold of good translators, so many Brits working in odd places all over the world – and (at least in the UK) so many authors born in the UK who cannot string together a complete sentence reliably, that I have long given up making any assumption about linguistic ability on the basis of name alone.

Once I have started to read, I draw my conclusions pretty rapidly, however – always bearing in mind that different parts of the manuscript are sometimes written by different people, so a shaky start may be followed by a fluent discussion – or, unfortunately (since it is much harder to second-guess a discussion), the other way around.

I would agree with Stuart Handysides' observation that "coherence and elegance are not necessarily greater in articles written by native speakers of the language". I have often had cases of Japanese authors who struggle with the English language, but because they are very clear in their own minds exactly what they want to say and how they want to present it, copy editing their papers has taken me less time than trying to wring some kind of clarity and continuity from the work of an undisciplined and possibly inexperienced native-speaker writer (eg, the junior author in a clinical research paper).

### Let's applaud double-blinded reviewing

From James Hartley, *j.hartley@psy.keele.ac.uk*

One of the reasons I am in favour of double-blind reviewing is that it cuts out the initial knowledge of the authors name, especially if the name is foreign.

In electronic systems, like the one used for the *British Journal of Educational Technology*, the reviewing panel used to be sent electronically the titles of all the latest submissions with their authors, and members of the panel selected papers for review that they were interested in. This has recently changed – now we get only the titles. Unfortunately, when you download the paper, you still get the author's name.

My point is that seeing a list of papers with the authors' names allows you to see which ones are written by "foreigners". You might be wrong – people with "foreign" names are common in the US and the UK – but returning to your original question that prompted this reply, I am afraid that papers might not have been selected for review because of this.

### Editors as the language gatekeepers

From Karen Shashok, *kshashok@kshashok.com*

I suspect that complaints about "the English" from reviewers and editors have done much to damage my reputation [as an author's editor] with clients, and have lost me a number of clients who felt their scientific peer must be right and I must be wrong, even if the gatekeeper's first

language is obviously not English, and even if I explain that the gatekeeper's "corrections" introduce grammar, syntax, or scientific style errors where the text was perfectly correct as submitted.

I've often wondered if those readers who actually read the Acknowledgements assumed my first language could not possibly be English because of my Belarusian surname, and simply interpreted differences between my way of saying it and their preferred way as evidence that I was wrong and they were right.

When I started doing professional STM translation and author editing in the early 1980s I made it a point that my name would appear in the Acknowledgements to indicate my contribution to the text that was to be submitted. I insisted on this for three reasons: (1) to give credit where credit was due (a New England cultural value, perhaps; I was born and raised in a small town in Connecticut); (2) to take responsibility for "the English" so that gatekeepers would realize that if they wanted to criticize it, they should blame me and not the authors; and (3) to publicize the quality of my work in the hope that readers would notice, and perhaps wish to obtain my services.

After about 25 years in the profession I've realized that all three were interesting working hypotheses concerning readers' reactions to the quality of "the English" in the text, but the evidence – in the form of gatekeepers' feedback and the effect on my business of all those 3000 or so articles with

my name in the Acknowledgements – has not supported any of them.

The provisional conclusions I draw based on what little direct or indirect feedback "the English" has elicited over the years from gatekeepers are:

(1) readers don't read the Acknowledgements very often, and don't care about the pre-submittal language or editing support the authors obtained;

(2) even when a translator or author's editor is thanked explicitly in the Acknowledgements, readers assume the authors were responsible for "the English", and gatekeepers will very often complain about "the English" anyway; and

(3) a mention in the Acknowledgements is not an effective way to publicize your work if you are someone who works with authors.

It's a question of competences. Gatekeepers are, we hope, subject experts who can evaluate the usefulness of the manuscript's contents to its target community of scientists. But an interesting hypothesis for study might be that because gatekeepers come from many different cultural backgrounds and have internalized many different assumptions about "good scientific English style", their perceptions of the language and writing are less likely to correlate than their perceptions about the scientific merits of the work. Gatekeepers may tend to assume they are authorities on "good scientific English style" when they are in fact overestimating their competence in this area.



See page 108 for a report of ESOF2008 and EASE's outreach activity: playing the scientific publication game

---

## Editing around the World

---

### The Africa Journals Partnership Project

**Muza Gondwe**

Editor, *Malawi Medical Journal* mgondwe@medcol.mw

African medical journals face several economic and social challenges in disseminating research findings to scientists and health practitioners. Most African journals are owned by academic institutions, are not indexed in major databases, are poorly funded, have poor circulation, and have difficulties maintaining publication schedules.<sup>1-3</sup> Currently, only 38 of the 5200 journals indexed in Medline are from Africa, and they represent 13 African countries. As of December 2007, among 6700 journals in ISI's Science Citation Index, only 20 were from Africa (four countries; only one on medicine). The vast majority of local researchers choose to publish in western journals, which have higher impact factors and larger circulation, leaving local journals with inadequate and poor quality submissions.<sup>4,5</sup>

In September 2003, the US National Institutes of Health through the Fogarty International Center (FIC), National Library of Medicine (NLM), and National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), funded a meeting in the UK that was hosted by the *BMJ* (British Medical Journal). The outcome of this meeting was the establishment of the Africa Journals Partnership Project, a mechanism to enhance the quality of four African journals. The four journals were chosen because they are in countries which have NIH-funded research and are part of the communication network developed by NLM for the Multilateral Initiative on Malaria. Partnerships were forged between African Health Sciences, Uganda, and the *BMJ*; *Ghana Medical Journal* and *The Lancet*; *Malawi Medical Journal* and *JAMA* (the journal of the American Medical Association); and *Mali Medical* and two US journals: *Environmental Health Perspectives* and the *American Journal of Public Health*.

Consultative meetings held with the editors of the African journals identified common challenges:

- Poor technological infrastructure, inadequate funding, and lack of human resource and technical skills to efficiently manage journal operations and maintain regular publication.
- Poor technologies for editorial functions such as peer review and the absence of systems for distribution, production, and marketing.
- Poor visibility and a limited web presence, due to not being indexed in a major database and lacking the capacity to build and maintain a journal website. As a result of this poor visibility, local authors were reluctant to submit their manuscripts, leading to an inadequate number of submissions and to poor quality manuscripts being submitted.

In addition there were problems with recruiting peer reviewers, lengthy turnaround time for review, and poor quality of reviews.

Nine tasks were defined to address the challenges faced by the African journals:

1. Identify equipment and facility needs of the African journals
2. Identify editorial needs of the African journals
3. Provide computer hardware and software to African journal publishing offices as well as initial training to editorial office personnel
4. Provide training for authors and reviewers
5. Provide training on establishing business plans for effective, sustainable publishing operations
6. Provide support for managing editors and business managers
7. Develop and maintain journal websites
8. Establish internships for representatives of African medical journals at journal editorial offices in the northern hemisphere
9. Commission systematic reviews on topics relevant to sub-Saharan Africa.

#### Project activities

The project's activities were funded by the NIH (through NLM and FIC) and facilitated by the Council of Science Editors (CSE) and led by the project coordinators Annette Flanagan of *JAMA* and Tom Goehl of *Environmental Health Perspectives*. To address the lack of technology infrastructure, detailed technical reports were developed by IT consultants for each journal. Using those reports, equipment – phones, computers, scanners, and software – was procured for each journal, and staff were trained.

Visits were arranged between partner journals in order to familiarize the African journals with editorial and publications practices in the western journals. Western journal partners also visited their African counterparts to appreciate the challenges that the African journals face. During the visits, the African editors were able to observe editorial and publishing practices, attend editorial meetings, and meet staff of their partner journal.

An important component of the project is capacity building. The editors of the African journals have participated in short courses on journal editing, publication management, manuscript editing, and statistics during the annual CSE meetings. The annual CSE meetings also provide an opportunity for all the journal editors and funders to meet to evaluate the project and discuss project plans and activities.

To improve the number and quality of manuscripts submitted and improve the quality of peer review, the African editors have organized local and regional workshops for authors and reviewers. To date a total of eight workshops have been conducted in Uganda, Mali, Malawi, and Ghana with over 100 authors and reviewers trained. These workshops also act as key opportunities for the journals to market themselves and increase their local visibility. The first set of workshops was facilitated by international experts and laid a foundation for the African editors and local experts to facilitate further workshops themselves. Additionally, the editor from the *Malawi Medical Journal*, Muza Gondwe, has attended a Tim Albert "Train the Trainer" course on writing journal articles and getting them published.

Financial sustainability is a key challenge faced by a majority of journals in developing countries. To address this, a workshop on journal sustainability and business operations was held in Malawi in February 2007 which was facilitated by the International Availability of Scientific Publication (INASP).

Six journals – *African Journal of Medicine and Medical Sciences*, *East Africa Medical Journal*, *Psychopathologie Africaine*, *Tanzania Health Research Bulletin*, *Revue Internationale des Sciences Médicales*, *Sudanese Journal of Public Health* – from the Forum for African Medical Editors (FAME) also attended this workshop with funding from the Special Program for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (TDR).<sup>6</sup> The outcome of this workshop was the development of long-term and short-term strategic plans for each journal, with a focus on financial and business evaluation and planning.

ScholarOne has donated Manuscript Central, an online manuscript tracking system. Two out of the four journals have implemented the system, and one is in process of doing so. Through a stipend from partnership funds, a full-time person has been employed at each journal to run the journal.

### Successes

Excellent progress has been made on seven out of nine tasks. One of the most important objectives for this project is to have all four journals indexed in Medline. *Mali Medical* was successful in its application for inclusion in Medline in 2006 and *Africa Health Science* in 2007. *Malawi Medical Journal* has applied and will be reviewed in October 2008.

All of the African journals have commented that the partnership project has met their needs, citing improvements in editorial processes, business operations, journal management, timely publications, increase in number of and quality of submissions, and improved web visibility. Performance indicators show an increase in manuscripts submitted (*African Health Sciences*, 109 in 2005 and 169 in 2006; *Mali Medical*, 76 in 2005 and 90 in 2006) a decrease in acceptance rate (*African Health Sciences*, 50% in 2005 and 27% in 2006); an increase in international submissions (*African Health Sciences*, 70 in 2005 and 125 in 2006); an increase in the number of reviewers (*African*

*Health Sciences*, increased by 85 in one year – half of whom are international).

The project is not simply a partnership but a network promoting south to south collaboration, where the African journals share experiences and knowledge with each other. The *African Health Science* journal representative visited the *Malawi Medical Journal* to receive training on the Manuscript Central system in May 2008. The use of this online system has decreased reviewer time, increased visibility of the journal, and enhanced journal management and editorial workflow.

The journals all recognize the significance of having journal websites. *Mali Medical* and *Malawi Medical Journal* are freely available on their own websites, and *African Health Science* and *Ghana Medical Journal* are freely available on PubMedCentral. Thanks to a donation of xml conversion services from SPi, *Ghana Medical Journal* and *African Health Science* have their back content on PubMedCentral, with *Malawi Medical Journal* striving to do so.

The African editors found the visits to their western counterparts a good learning experience and were able to pick up tips on various workflow practices, such as appraising manuscripts and journal production, that they have been able to apply to their local journal. The visits and editorial training have motivated the editors to make more and better use of the editorial board, from identification of peer reviewers to advice on policy issues.

The African journals editors attended annual meetings of the Council of Science Editors in three consecutive years. These meetings have enabled editors to receive training, partake in meetings on subjects relevant to editing in the developing world such as AuthorAID, network with editors from across the world, make presentations, and join CSE committees.<sup>7</sup> CSE has made available complimentary memberships for the African journal editors and supports their attendance at the meetings and workshops.

### Challenges

The project has been very successful in achieving its goals. However, two tasks remain to be completed: the establishment of internships at the western journals, and the commissioning of systematic reviews. After consultation with the African partners, these tasks were modified in 2007 to internships at African journal offices to address the issue of editorial succession, and commissioning of rigorous (rather than systematic) scientific reviews.

In order to monitor the progress of the project, routine data needs to be obtained - and without systems in place this has proved to be a challenge. The Manuscript Central tracking system will hopefully improve retrieval of performance indicators like numbers of submissions, speed of decision making, and performance of peer reviewers. This data will produce information for use in the long-term evaluation of the project and, more importantly, it will enable editors to easily evaluate their own journals over time. Uptake of the system has been slow, however. The lack of a French version of Manuscript Central is a barrier to successful uptake for *Mali Medical*.

Perceptions of authors, reviewers, and readers are also important in evaluating a journal. In the future, the journals hope to conduct surveys to determine these perceptions.

### The future

The project has been awarded a second grant for another five years. This grant will support the four existing partners, as well as two other journals which are yet to be selected. This grant is focused on better meeting the needs of the journals, supporting areas such as online publishing, updating of equipment and software, support for an intern, continued support for author/review workshops, and workshops on communicating science to journalists and policy makers.

The achievements of this project would not have been possible without funding from NIH and administrative support from CSE. Activities of the project have also been supported by SPi, TDR, INASP, and ScholarOne.

This project has formed friendships and networks that will extend past the lifetime of the project. With continued support from all stakeholders, this project can and will make a significant impact on African journal publishing.

### References

1. Siegfried N, Busgeeth K, Certain E. Scope and geographical distribution of African medical journals active in 2005. *South African Medical Journal* 2006; 96(6):533–538.
2. Tijssen R. Africa's contribution to the worldwide research literature: New analytical perspectives, trends, and performance indicators. *Scientometrics* 2007;71(2):303–327.
3. Horton R. Medical journals: evidence of bias against the diseases of poverty. *Lancet* 2003; 361(9359):712–713.
4. Uthman OA, Uthman MB. Geography of Africa biomedical publications: an analysis of 1996-2005 PubMed papers. *International Journal of Health Geographics* 2007;10(6):46.
5. Soteriades ES, Rosmarakis ES, Paraschakis K, Falagas ME. Research contribution of different world regions in the top 50 biomedical journals (1995-2002). *FASEB Journal* 2006;20(1):29–34.
6. Koech DK. A forum for African medical editors is formed in a Geneva meeting. *African Journal of Health Science* 2002;9:112.
7. Freeman P, Robbins A. The publishing gap between rich and poor: the focus of AuthorAID. *Journal of Public Health Policy* 2006;27:196–203

## From the Archive – 30 years ago

### News Notes from *Earth & Life Science Editing* (7), 1978

#### International Serials Catalogue

ICSU-AB, the International Council of Scientific Unions Abstracting Board, has announced publication plans for the largest serials data resource ever compiled. Basic bibliographic facts on over thirty thousand scientific and technical periodicals will be listed, forming a valuable bibliographic reference work as well as serving the prime aim, which was to study coverage characteristics of the nineteen member services of ICSU-AB, and to improve bibliographic accuracy at the input stage of these services.

#### Primary Communications Research Centre Publications

The Primary Communications Research Centre set up at Leicester University in 1976 has recently completed a number of projects of interest to editors in the earth and life sciences. Among them are the following:

The Visual Impact of Scholarly Journal Articles: May Katzen, Nov 1977

A study of the evaluation of research papers by primary journals in the UK: M Gordon, April 1978

Trends in scholarly communication in the United States and Western Europe: May Katzen, March 1978

Scholarly Publishers Guide: New Methods and Techniques (1st edition): Sept 1977

#### Writing Scientific Papers in English

A paperback edition of the very successful guide by M O'Connor and Peter Woodford, *Writing Scientific Papers in English*, is to be published in September 1978 by Pitman Medical & Scientific Publishing Co Ltd, 42 Camden Road, Tunbridge Wells, Kent TN1 2QD, England. The expected price for the new version is £1.25.

#### Footnote

Owing to non-receipt of some copy the editors regret that the **News Notes** and **Editor's Bookshelf** sections of this issue have had to be drastically abbreviated.