

EDITORIAL:

FOR ONE CROWDED HOUR OF GLORIOUS LIFE

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The idea of producing a surgical supplement of the *Medical Journal of Malaysia (MJM)* arose out of an AGM decision of the College of Surgeons of Malaysia that the *Malaysian Journal of Surgery* which had made a few appearances since its inception in 1975 did not seem to have the confidence of the Malaysian surgeons. Its demise seemed inevitable since it was continuously beleaguered by financial problems, which had prevented it from being published regularly, in addition to the inadequate contribution of papers.

The College had further felt that the surgeons in Malaysia had developed a fairly well-recognised phobia to write and that it had to take some remedial action.

A survey of the *MJM* in the last three years (1983 – 1985) revealed that out of an average total annual publication of 66, there was only an average of 15 (22.7%) "surgical papers" each year.¹ Out of the 200 papers published in the *MJM* from March 1983 to December 1985, there were 15 papers on General Surgery, six on Maxil-

lofacial and Plastic Surgery, six on Urology, four on Orthopaedic Surgery, two in Cardiovascular Surgery, three on Ophthalmology, two in Anaesthesia, two on Obstetrics and Gynaecology, and one on Neurosurgery (41 papers in all).

It may perhaps be opportune to pause and ponder why this degree of apathy exists amongst our surgeons to write in journals, and to identify some of the possible causes and how to overcome them. There is no shortage of clinical material which could be studied and which could provide the framework for any number of excellent scientific and clinical treatise in our country. Visitors to our wards constantly remark on the wealth of material, and wonder why hardly any original research or data-based articles of any significance ever emerge from Malaysia.

The one standard reply that comes ever so readily is that we have very heavy service commitments in our clinical practice, which leaves the surgeon with neither the energy, enthusiasm or the time, to embark on research or write papers. We are aware of the heavy workload in our general hospitals throughout the country, and the shortage of trained staff who could be relied upon to shoulder some of the burden.

To blame our dismal and barren outlook entirely on such arguments is, to some extent, typical of Malaysian negativism. Parkinson has said that work expands to fill the time available

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for its completion. There is also considerable truth in the proverbial phrase that it is the busiest man who has time to spare. It is inconceivable that our surgeons are so busy that they have no time to write.

Another oft-repeated lament is the poor system of keeping medical records in our hospitals, which make any attempts at data-retrieval a nightmarish outing. The 'system' of medical record-keeping is fraught with faults and flaws. Somehow, illogical though it may sound, this is one vital area that has eluded the attention of medical administrators thus far.

Directly, as a result of poorly organised and maintained medical records, time and energy are wasted tracing patient records. Quite often the case records are not traceable at all, even between successive clinic attendance of patients. Important X-rays and results of essential investigations are often missing from the folders.

Computer technology has infiltrated every sector of the commercial world and has contributed to the improved departments. However, this has yet to catch the imagination of the medical administrators in our country. Computers can be fruitfully employed in data processing, patient care activities and production of research papers.

Inability to trace and obtain case records, as and when necessary, is at present a confounding dilemma and the major factor contributing to our academic sterility.

Absence of easy access to current medical journals, text books and references is yet another drawback. Most hospitals, including those in major cities and towns in Malaysia, have no proper libraries or stock of medical literature, and the aspiring medical writer is frustrated in his attempts and desire to update himself and to refer to relevant literature when he wishes to record his clinical and surgical inspirations.

The fairly well-stocked medical libraries are in the medical faculties of the universities, and even these have not given the right impetus for

academic surgical staff to research and write. Through special requests made by the Malaysian Medical Association, the doors and facilities of these university medical libraries are now open to non-university medical practitioners on compliance with some simple rules. A medical literature search facility is also available through the British Council in Kuala Lumpur, for a small fee.

The highly-charged and motivated young surgical specialist upon his return home from overseas after acquiring the fellowship of the Colleges of Surgeons, is soon lulled into a state of pathetic, somnolent indifference when he gets posted as a consultant surgeon to a state general hospital. He soon finds that his future employment and progress in life does not depend on how many journals he reads, nor on how many research papers he submits to the local medical journal, or how many surgical conferences he attends overseas.

Perhaps the Ministry of Health, to improve its image, the quality of service that its specialists provide, and to evolve a system of recognition of their performance for purposes of postings and promotion, should encourage its specialists to perform approved clinical research and write, and to give weightage to these factors for promotions and senior appointments. This would drive home the power in that age-old adage "Publish or Perish".

The image of the Malaysian surgeon in the international eye is blurred and nondescript. Except for a handful who have achieved international recognition, the rest of the surgical fraternity in this country is basking in oblivion.

We may feel weak-kneed and diffident to submit our scientific papers for publication in internationally-recognised surgical journals, just in case we get unceremoniously rejected. But, we should not hold such fears in sending our creations to local medical journals, like the *MJM* or the *Family Practitioner*, which have an important role to play in providing our surgeons a medium to publicise our surgical literary prowess. The *MJM* does enjoy an international readership and is on

the *Index Medicus*. This supplement is testimony to the fact that the Malaysian surgeon can put forth creditable papers with some gentle persuasion.

The College of Surgeons of Malaysia hopes that our surgeons will take the cue and henceforth contribute papers to the *MJM* for publication. Only through such humble beginnings can we hope to project the Malaysian surgeon and the tremendous work that he is doing in his specialist field,

and thereby gain the accolades of the world at large.

“One crowded hour of glorious life
Is worth an age without a name.”

Thomas O. Mardaunt

REFERENCE

- ¹ Chandrasekharan N, Abu Bakar Suleiman, Krishnan R. Editorial: Research output and publications. *Med. J M'sia* 1986; 41(2):103–107.