

EDITORIAL

Towards better scientific writing

It is with much trepidation and a sense of elation that I have accepted the editorship of the MJM. The hesitation is because this is the first time that an editor is not resident in the seat of power in Kuala Lumpur. Compounding this is the fact that the MJM has been going through a rather turbulent period in terms of its chronically delayed appearances, financial dependency, resentment from authors about difficulties in getting their papers published and from readers about the general quality of some of the papers published. The task of putting the journal on the right tract is going to be a formidable one and at the same time an equally challenging one.

There is some elation for the confidence council has placed in me to undertake this exciting task. The opportunity to have adequate contact with clinical and research problems at the University Hospital in Kubang Kerian would be an advantage. The anticipation that my colleagues in the editorial board as well as the School of Medical Sciences with their increasing breadth of knowledge would become readily accessible for critical evaluation of papers will make my task easier, gives room for some comfort. The environment at the USM medical school should be congenial for this pursuit. Despite all the pressures on my time, I shall put the work of the journal on a high priority listing. I would see it as part of the MMA's contribution to medical education and would like to thank the USM for allowing me to undertake this task for the MMA.

Some Problems

The dissatisfaction on the part of authors are many, ranging from non acceptance of their papers, having to revise and rewrite their compositions, delays in their writings appearing in print to communication problems with the MMA secretariat.

I would like to reassure authors and readers that the delays are not entirely the machinations of the editor or the editorial staff. They are often the result of over eagerness to publish in the journal for one reason or another. The authors have the power to remedy some of these complaints themselves (physician heal thyself first).

Some solutions

Each person who wishes to author a paper can help to expedite matters (rather unclutter) by abstaining, unless he has a noteworthy, new or interesting finding to report. The ability to present his findings/material clearly and succinctly within the guidelines set by the MJM in its notes to contributors is an essential and desirable quality. Authors should read and re read their papers, and get their senior colleagues or peers to read and comment. Constructive criticisms are very useful. Only when they are fully satisfied should the paper be sent to the MJM.

Authors should also prior to sending such papers for publication, endeavour to present their findings at departmental seminars or scientific meetings of societies or weekly case conferences. The comments of colleagues or discussions arising should be taken into account to improve their paper before submission. Otherwise it would be one of frustration for both the author as well as the editors

of the MJM. Frequent revisions and the consequent exchange of correspondence adds to the delays.

It is not our function to rewrite a paper for you. Those without the requisite experience should seek the guidance and enlist the assistance of their senior colleagues or heads of departments where appropriate. Consultants and heads of departments in medical schools and hospitals should consider this as part of their overall responsibility towards medical education and manpower development. Currently this responsibility seems to be borne entirely by the MJM and its editorial staff.

Why publish?

Often one hears in the corridors of medical schools/hospitals or at cocktail parties that one is compelled to write or publish a paper to be considered for promotion/confirmation. Without entering into the merits/demerits of basing promotions/confirmations on the basis of authoring papers, it would seem time that Universities and other institutions recognise that the value of authoring one or two hastily assembled papers for the above purpose is very limited. If promotions/confirmations are to be made, they should be given regardless of whether a deserving individual who has excelled himself as a good teacher and dedicated clinician publishes a few case reports or not. It is worth reminding those members of selection committees who make exacting demands to look back at their own records. Of course, it cannot be denied that it would be ideal to promote a person who has excelled all round. However, promotions should not be the *raison d'être* for submitting shoddy papers for publication.

Review of papers

All papers submitted are seen and discussed by members of the Editorial Board and referees. The editor makes the final decision on publication in the light of reports from the referees. This practice would continue. The editor would correspond with the authors conveying the decision and where appropriate negotiate improvements in the paper in the light of his own judgement and referees' reports. The final accepted version of the manuscript is managed by the Executive Editor who will make adjustments to improve clarity and presentation and insert the instructions to printer.

Referees

The main function of referees is to advise editors, not decide for them, whether papers are suitable for publication in the MJM and whether the work is original, of high quality, up to date, described in sufficient detail, and clear enough for readers to follow the argument or replicate the procedure.

Referees also help to educate the authors by suggesting improvements in the form and presentation of papers. The comments they receive from the editors and referees may help them when they write their next paper. It is necessary for members of the Editorial Board to have the knack of choosing the perceptive referee who is able to improve the quality of the paper by constructive criticism. Refereeing of articles is time consuming and often troublesome. However, the educational benefits it brings to them are tremendous and so is the learning from the editor's comments. The rewards in goodwill are great. However, there will be no room for referees who are slow to respond and superficial in the assessment of papers sent to them.

Communication skills

In recent years there has been an uninhibited growth of poorly written papers, which need considerable reconstructive and cosmetic surgery before they could be salvaged to appear in print. We have to reject papers containing statements/conclusions that are wrong, trivial or based on inadequate methods, while being generous towards minor flaws.

Over the years communication skills appear to be on the decline, as evident from the large number of poorly written papers submitted from Universities and government institutions. This problem has also been recently confirmed to be true by the newly appointed Vice Chancellor of the University of Malaya, Professor Syed Hussein Alatas in a recent press interview. This decline has also been tied up with falling standards in English.

Communication skills are important for both the study of medical disciplines as well as for communication with patients, students, colleagues and administrators. The ability to write clearly, succinctly and accurately is important for documentation purposes and will become more so with the introduction of problem oriented medical records (POMR) in hospitals. It is essential that medical schools rectify this deficiency by the introduction of suitable educational programmes and at the same time provide the type of assistance young aspiring writers may need. It would not be out of place for the Medical Journal of Malaysia, the premier medical journal in this region, to play its part in this vital area of medical education.

Ethics

It is often disheartening, that after all the efforts of the reviewers and editors, the author decides to send the reviewed and edited paper to another journal which accepts it, of course, without much difficulty and the author unabashedly proclaims that his paper was not accepted by the MJM but has been accepted and published elsewhere. There is a failure to acknowledge the contribution of the MJM. This is unethical.

Future outlook

The number of original papers has to improve, particularly prospective longitudinal studies, while reducing the number of case reports, retrospective studies and hastily written preliminary reports, or parts of a study which very often are not followed by the intended detailed reports. The publication time has to be kept low, from the time of receipt of manuscripts. A new innovation would be the commissioning of papers/articles which would provide a background for the general readers and enable the editor to accept sound specialised original work of limited appeal. We urge Senior Consultants, Heads of Departments and Professors to encourage and provide the right environment to their colleagues and juniors to undertake research and publish on areas of concern in this country. Only then can a steady flow of articles for the MJM be assured and this would ensure that we would have a choice of articles to sustain the regularity of the journal with quality papers.

Professor N. Chandrasekharan