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The Unifying Dilemma of The Pakistani Science Journals

Saba Sohail

In recent past, considerable attention has been drawn towards measures of improving the quality of local medical journals.¹ Major factors have been identified as quality of submission, quality of peer review, homogeneity or otherwise of the in-house assessment, non-availability of full time professional medical editors,² so on and so forth. Yet a recent congregation of local sciences journals under the auspices of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) Pakistan unanimously pointed out to another ground reality that hinders sustenance of a science journal—medical journals being no exception—that is the financial cost of science publication and dissemination. This cost just does not include printing. It encompasses the printing equipment, office support staff salaries, honoraria to editors and reviewers, stationery, the utilities and even postage charges. Though the printing charges may vary according to the number of copies printed per issue, frequency of publication, quality of paper used and printing press charges, it was reported that even postal charges for distributing a single issue of a journal averaged to be Pak Rs.60,000 varying from Rs.30-98,000. Majority editors stated a total publication and dissemination cost in excess of a million rupees a year. Obviously the finance factor assumes a vital importance if a journal has to be regular. Various means identified for the required sum were advertisement, publication charges extorted from the contributing authors, reducing expenditure, grants from funding agencies and improved subscriptions. Let us explore each.

The advertisements can cover only a fraction of the cost in most instances unless one wishes to turn a science journal into a commercial bulletin. Each linked industry - the pharmaceuticals in case of biomedical journals - also has budgetary constraints and heads that limit fastidious advertisements in scientific journals. Huge money is usually spent on conferences and more gainly and personalized promotion than on advertisements that only researchers and post-graduate trainees will read. Moreover, journals like JCPSP stress upon the ethical and moral aspects of

advertisement; for example the Journal does not accept advertisement for alternate medicine therapeutic agents that may have dubious contents or evade stating the exact chemical constituents. This practice does limit the amount of advertisement received.

Next comes the publication charges paid by authors. Many journals including JCPSP do not charge authors for any processing or printing while the rest do. Moreover, it was delicately hinted at the same congregation that the coveted 'W' category may be denied to a local journal if the panel of category-awarding reviewers considers charging an unethical practice irrespective of that journal's performance and impact factor achievement. Food for thought!

Then comes the grant awarded by funding agencies. The major local funding agencies for research journal publication have been the HEC, PMRC, Pakistan Science Foundation and the professional organization/society/ Institution that a journal is affiliated with. The HEC allocates grant only to the HEC recognized journals and even that is proportional to the category 'W, Y or Z' awarded to the journal by HEC. To-date, there are only 7 local medical journals recognized by HEC while there happen to be over 50 such journals and over 30 are recognized by PMDC for academia promotion purpose. None of the local biomedical journal belongs to the 'W' category, which implies an internationally accredited journal with an impact factor where publication can be considered for induction in the highly paid Tenure Track System. The sum allocated to this category is a maximum of Rs.700,000 and that to the other categories varies from Rs.30,000 to 430,000. So it remains the affiliated organizations'—The College of Physicians and Surgeons in case of JCPSP—responsibility to finance their research journal unconditionally and faithfully for the greater cause of promotion and dissemination of research.

The most intriguing aspect remains the non-existent subscription culture in the local medical community. Hardly any Pakistani medical journal can claim substantial revenue generation by subscription. The exact cause remains to be un-earthed but general opinion points towards general lack of serious reading habits, reciprocal exchange between journals, complimentary copies and of course the full-content, on-line availability of articles.

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Whatever be the cause, financial constraint remains one of the major obstacles in sustaining many science journals. It is time for the editors to join hands and make combined efforts for overcoming this obstacle. Increased awareness and promotion of readership remains a pivotal measure that can alter the scenario in the long-term.

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