

The Ethiopian Journal of Health Development: Retrospective Synopsis

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The Ethiopian Journal of Health Development has been the leading public health journal in Ethiopia for more than two decades. The fast track to achieve its current status rests on the highly committed organizations and the dedicated editorial committees that worked tirelessly albeit the meager resources available for the Journal. Addis Ababa University has been supporting the Journal from its inception till now; the Department of Community Health, now School of Public Health, being at the forefront in undertaking the day-to-day functions of the Journal. The Ethiopian Public Health Association associated itself with the Journal shortly after its inception; and ever since has embraced the Journal as its main scholarly organ. The partnership of the University and the Association was one of the most important factors for the success of the Journal. I strongly believe the partnership is critical for the continual growth of the Journal in the future too. Without the dedicated efforts and contributions of the University staffs the production of the Journal is unthinkable; without paying disproportionate price. On the other hand, the advocacy power of the Association is also priceless.

In the early years of the Journal the lack of the adequate submission of papers both in quantity and quality was a serious challenge. The expansion of postgraduate education in public health created a more conducive environment for improving the quality and frequency of the Journal. The first postgraduate education in public health was opened at Addis Ababa University in 1984. Although the number of graduates was small it was sufficient to galvanize the public health debate. The graduates and their instructors became enthusiastic about publishing their research findings. That created a better competitive selection process for the Journal. The level of competition grew even more when Universities of Gondar and Jimma initiated postgraduate training. Another source of growth in quality was due to the contributions made by the research institutes in Ethiopia by way of demanding their staffs to publish more frequently for promotion purposes. Submissions from outside Ethiopia also increased when the Editorial Board was reorganized to include internationally and regionally renowned scientists.

The increased submission significantly improved the quality and readability of the Journal. The downside of that was the increasing rate of rejection to reasonably decrease the time between submission and publishing. This in turn deterred some submission due to prior disappointments. The creation of other national and regional journals also diverted potentially good papers from the Ethiopian Journal of Health Development.

Although such developments are useful for encouraging sharing of information efficiently, it is absolutely important to note that quality assurance systems need to be in place. It also rings a bell for the Ethiopian Journal of Health Development to work much harder than before and in a coherent manner in order to maintain its position as a leading public health journal in Ethiopia.

The availability of the Journal in many open access forums has substantially improved its visibility outside Ethiopia. It is now the main source of scholarly public health information on Ethiopia. Its contents are fully downloadable and distributed freely. Now researchers and professionals from anywhere can access the Journal at anytime via the internet. This was a great achievement obtained through the collaborative work with the African Journal Online initiative and the University of Bergen. This is another critical piece of decision made by the Editorial Board in the growth of the Journal which I believe should be maintained for the Journal to remain in the forefront of public health. The more the Journal is made easily accessible, the better the chances to be used for guiding practice and policy are improved. The cost production and distribution of the Journal cannot be generated through subscription alone. The Journal as the organ of the Association and the avenue for publishing researches done by the University scholars and graduates, the cost of its production and distribution should be covered by means other than subscription. The number of open access Journals available internationally is increasing by the day. They encourage both publishing and readership freely; especially for developing country authors and readers.

Another very important achievement of the Journal was the timely publication of special issues and articles. The HIV/AIDS updates published yearly by dedicated authors was an illustration of the Journal's commitment to provide useful information to priority diseases in Ethiopia that are top in the public health agenda in the public and other sectors. Special issues of the Journal have been very popular. They provided first hand information to professionals based on field research. A wide range of issues were covered in the special issue series including issues on HIV/AIDS, malaria, medical education, respiratory tract infection, violence against women, health extension program in Ethiopia, field research systems and blindness. All were very popular readings and useful for shaping the public health policy and practice in Ethiopia.

Although the Journal is made available freely electronically via internet, request for subscription from

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in and out of country increased. That may indicate that libraries and organizations desire to have the Journal in their collections. Until the internet becomes a routine job-aid for all professionals, the paper publications need to be expanded in order to reach public health professionals in rural areas.

It may be important to substantially increase efforts to serve more authors who wish to publish their work in the Journal. Increasing the frequency of publications and further shortening the duration between submission and publication can increase the volume of submission. However, that kind of move would require reorganizing the Editorial Office differently. A part-time volunteer editor cannot handle editorial work of that volume. In fact, the workload as it stands now is a formidable task for a part-time editor. As an ex-editor of the Journal I have managed in my last few years workload that amounts to a full time work. Thus, any future development of the Journal would require having an editor who is fully dedicated to the job. If that happens the editor must be chosen through a very competitive process to ensure that he/she is a well accomplished and committed professional and not one who just fills the position.

As I reported elsewhere, the Journal is currently indexed in the African Index Medicus and Index Copernicus (with an impact factor of 5.41). It is a member of the open access databases such as African Journal Online (AJOL) and Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). The Journal is a founding member of the Forum for African Medical Editors (FAME). As a member of FAME it has contributed to the growth of scientific publications in the African continent.

I have also witnessed some critical challenges in publishing the Journal in a regular and quality manner to maintain its reputation. These challenges are related to authors, reviewers and the capacity of the Editorial Office. Authors often create formidable challenges to reviewers and editors by not strictly following instructions and the Journal's style. Some authors have great ideas but simply lack writing skills. Most of the

reviewers, in addition to lacking any kind of training themselves, are often too busy and fail to keep the recommended turnaround time for manuscript review. The Editorial Office, apart from being led by a part-time editor, the capacity of the editorial staffs has been limited. The editorial committee and editors put a lot of effort to surmount these shortcomings and maintain a good track record for the Journal. These challenges are serious threats to the continuing success of the Journal and need to be addressed systematically and appropriately.

Another important challenge worth mentioning is the difficulty in the actual printing of the Journal. It is important to maintain the structure, consistency, color, and timeliness of the Journal to assure the reader about its quality and frequency. Sometimes, printing with the right kind of paper at the right time was extremely difficult. The printers of the Journal could not always guarantee the use of the same material for printing. At times, the editorial staff have to purchase and supply the right kind and amount of paper by going through a very complicated and time consuming process. The attempt to change printers created more problems because of absence of experience in publishing scholarly journals locally. I admire the efforts of the editorial staff for doing that time and again.

Financial constraints were also threats for the existence of the Journal a few times. The generous supports made by WHO at its establishment and later by Sida/SAREC, the Ethiopian Science and Technology Commission, the Canadian Public Health Association, and CDC alleviated the financial constraints. The Ethiopian Public Health Association played a very important role in alleviating financial constraints of the Journal.

It is not easy to summarize such a long history of the Journal in such a short article but I sincerely hope that I have made a fair summary of the achievements and challenges of the Journal. Finally, at its 25th anniversary celebration, I sincerely wish the Journal to flourish and maintain its leading position forever.