

Lessons from London: The BMJ Editorial Process

Ensinaamentos de Londres: O Processo Editorial do BMJ



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“Tell me and I forget, teach me and I remember, involve me and I learn”, Benjamin Franklin said. When talking about the renewed Acta Médica Portuguesa - Student (AMP-Student) and the challenges we are tackling, it could not be otherwise.

Between the 4th and 7th of May, three of the AMP-Student Editors' were given the opportunity to visit the British Medical Journal (BMJ) editorial office in London. They participated in the main editorial meetings, with the intention to not only learn from a well-structured editorial process and to evaluate its' applicability to Acta Médica Portuguesa (AMP) reality, but also to promote a reciprocal cooperation between both journals. As Editors' of a medical journal directed to medical students and junior doctors, these meetings also provided us with useful information about different perspectives and approaches to medical students' publication issues, only possible with the collaboration of the Student BMJ Editorial board.

About The BMJ and Student BMJ

The BMJ is an international peer-reviewed medical journal with an archive that goes back to 1840¹ and a fully online first publication. Its editorial office is located in London, but the editors are distributed throughout the world. The journal has an impact factor of 17.4 (2014 JCR Science Edition), occupying the fifth place among general medical journals. The Student BMJ was launched in 1992, focusing on supporting medical students through every stage of their graduation with the purpose of having an impact on their future careers, by giving insights on important medical and political topics.

Structure

As one of the top five general medical journals, BMJ comprises an impressively organized structure, which largely contributes to the overall quality of their published material, whereas keeping editorial integrity. Besides, The BMJ comprises a multidisciplinary team composed by

specialists from different backgrounds. As a global brand whose vision is focused on the reader, a substantial part of the team is made up by journalists, who not only dedicate themselves to provide journalistic treatment to the majority of the published materials, but also to daily collect some of the highlights on medical concerns.

Editorial process

Since the aim of The BMJ is “to help doctors make better decisions”, all the editorial process is designed to ensure the quality of the published manuscripts and to guarantee their applicability to the daily clinical practice. Thus the decision process is based on a concept of shared responsibility and supported decisions.

This policy strictly applies to manuscript submission and evaluation. The first editorial decision focuses on quality and pertinence according to the journals' scope and is made by two editors serially, being the second editor responsible to subscribe or not the first editor's resolution. The same shared decision process follows after the peer-reviewing process leading to the final acceptance or rejection of the manuscript for publication.

Transparency

The BMJ also intends to ensure transparency on the entire publication process and therefore introduced a concept of publishing not only the final version of the article but also the articles' complete pre-publication history, comprising all signed reviews, previous versions of the article, the study protocol, the report from The BMJ's manuscript committee meeting, and the authors' responses to the editors' and reviewers' comments.²

Patient's role and multimedia

An interesting particularity of the peer-review process was implemented in 2014 and refers to the involvement of patients as reviewers. They started by reviewing randomised controlled trials, and now their involvement extended to all

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research papers where their input might be useful to clinical purposes.³ The journal's focus on the involvement of patients in medical publishing might indicate a path to follow when it comes to the peer-review of medical journals.

Another novelty was the concept of video abstracts, which is a very interesting approach not only for the reader, who can access a short and interactive abstract of the article, but also for the author, who has the chance to share his research work in a more visual and engaging way.

Writing for students

Although both Student-BMJ and AMP-Student have the same target readers, their organisation and scope diverge. AMP-Student goal is to become the main vehicle of scientific publication among Portuguese medical students and junior doctors, whereas the purpose of Student-BMJ is to provide useful and updated information for their readers' daily practice. These two visions have their own intrinsic strengths and should be considered complementary, meaning that each journal should not see their strategy as immutable.

In order to completely meet their readers' needs, Student BMJ reinvented not only their publication strategy, having assigned to each number a spotlight theme, but also their journal contents and structure. As so, in their printed edition we can find sections dedicated to the application to medical school, junior doctors' main interests and concerns and alternative or conservative career paths. The clinical section is the second biggest chapter, where clinical reviews and updates, practical skills, and research articles related to the spotlight theme are published. Finally, we may find the News and Views content, where the current hot topics regarding medical students concerns and doubts are approached. However, since these topics are daily changing and cannot be fully addressed on a three months' basis printed edition, the online section of the journal is meant to guarantee that the reader is always updated.

Student BMJ is also aware of the importance that social networks have obtained on the interaction with younger audience and in the spread of scientific knowledge.

Therefore, Student-BMJ developed a social network policy, independently from The BMJ, which is used to easily communicate, receive readers' feedback and to promote a strong connection with the medical students' community.

From ideas to practice

As a unique learning opportunity, this visit to The BMJ served as an inspirational drive to reorganise the AMP-Student structure in order to improve our quality standards concerning the editorial process and scientifically offer and to invest on further contents for Portuguese medical students. Although some of our platforms were recently developed, we intend to redesign them in order to provide students with skills on different topics, such as scientific writing, and to widen our target audience to students that will apply to medical school. We also intend to expand our editorial board by accounting with the collaboration of students from different fields, namely journalism, marketing or statistics, whose contribution will be fundamental to improve AMP-Student's publications design, quality and ability to communicate with our readers.

We truly believe that the opportunity of spending these three days in The BMJ office, being involved in their structure and daily working routine, not only provided us tools to improve the quality and the rigor of our editorial process in both AMP and AMP-Student, but also the duty and the responsibility to call on the Portuguese Medical Association need to invest more in AMP, setting it as one of its priorities when it comes to medical scientific publication.

If British Medical Association invested in their own scientific journal with tremendously positive results, we believe that the Portuguese Medical Association should also be willing to do so. This must be one of our ambitions if we want to promote a scientific culture in medical community, and, above all, in the public.

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