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Viewpoint

Peer-reviewed public health journals from Arabic-speaking countries: An updated snapshot

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Abstract There is a positive association between availability of regional peer-reviewed public health information systems and progressive change in community and population health. The objective of this brief report was to identify public health journals in Arabic-speaking countries actively publishing as of 2016. We conducted an electronic search in several electronic database records for public health journals using a combination of search terms. We excluded journals that focused on human medicine, veterinary medicine, nursing, and other discipline-specific or clinical health professions. We identified twenty-five public health journals for review. Five journals were interrupted or discontinued. Only three journals had a consistent, uninterrupted active publication history of greater than 20 years. Most journals were not in the regional native language. Introduction of regional public health-dedicated journals with in-print and electronic availability and also to be published in region-native languages may require interdisciplinary partnerships. Region-wide public health journals such as the *Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal* could serve as an ideal model for the establishment of additional local and regional public health journals in Arabic-speaking countries. *Journal of Public Health Policy* (2017) 38, 146–157.

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Introduction

Since 2010, the Arabic-speaking world has experienced an on-going and region-wide transition that has impacted major aspects of life including political, social, economic, and public health policies.¹ With a new textbook² and several recent high-impact publications^{3–7} discussing public health issues facing the Arabic-speaking world, contemporary interest in public health in this highly volatile region has increased.⁵ The Arabic-speaking world, that includes countries with some of the highest and of the lowest Gross Domestic Product per capita in the world, is uniquely affected by its heterogeneity, its profound and varying degrees of public health inequities and complexities.⁸ To overcome the region's public health challenges will require public health research focused on them and carried out where they occur. This in turn requires transmitting and disseminating that research. Many global and international health journals publish work from and on Arabic-speaking countries. Due to language barriers and journal accessibility, these journals may not be easily accessible to native Arabic-speaking public health practitioners in the region. One way to address such barriers is by local and regional publication and dissemination of public health journals available in Arabic. The *Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal*, is the best example. Established in 1995, the *Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal* has been internationally recognized as the flagship public health periodical for the Eastern Mediterranean. It targets 19 Arabic-speaking countries. It is published by the Eastern Mediterranean Regional office of the World Health Organization.⁹

The objectives of peer-reviewed public health journals are to:

- (1) disseminate and advance evidence-based public health knowledge,
- (2) serve as vehicles and fora for continuing public health education and professional networking,
- (3) introduce and critique new and existing public health research and theoretical frameworks, and
- (4) influence public health policy and practice.^{10,11}

There is a positive association between availability of regional peer-reviewed public health information systems and progressive change in community and population health.¹²

When compared to Latin America, Europe, Asia, Africa, North America, and the Pacific regions, the Arabic-speaking world ranks second to last in collaborative public health output.¹³ Blair *et al*¹⁴ accurately and cautiously warned against the use of the term *Arab world* as a concept when addressing public health research in this region. They proposed instead to define the region as the 22 member countries of the Arab League: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, and the Palestinian Territories.

While previous studies^{15–17} have examined the status of available medical and biomedical journals in other regions of the world, no attempt has been made to provide an updated contemporary snapshot of current local and region-specific public health journals available in the Arabic-speaking world.

Despite being the historical cradle of many scientific disciplines, the Arabic-speaking world spent 0.2 per cent of its gross domestic product on research and dissemination¹⁸ compared to China that devoted 1.4 per cent and Europe 1.6 per cent. Arabic-speaking countries produce less than 1 per cent of all research citations globally, and contribute less than 0.5 per cent of public health research publications. Arabic-speaking countries combined produce less than 1 per cent of the research documents published in North America.¹⁹ In response, we investigated the availability of local and regionally active peer-reviewed public health journals in the Arab-speaking world. We want to raise awareness of this disparity in public health research.

We hope our search adds value for addressing:

- The deficiency in public health journals originating from the Arabic-speaking region. Among 2,740 institutions that produce health-related research, as of 2013, only 60 are in Arabic-speaking countries¹⁹
- Growing interest in public health priorities facing this region
- Current public health challenges facing Arabic-speaking countries, given the need for a clear understanding of the current and future status of public health research in this region, for both native and non-native researchers



Methods

To identify public health journals published in Arabic-speaking countries, we conducted an electronic search using:

- (1) PubMed NLM Catalog Journals referenced in the NCBI Database records,²⁰
- (2) Scopus,
- (3) Google Scholar,
- (4) ScienceDirect, plus Index Medicus for the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office Database Journals Directory (IMEMR).²¹

To identify each respective public health journal listed, we carried out an integrative search combining search terms “public health; public health sciences; epidemiology; global health; international health; community health; behavioral health; environmental health; health education; health promotion; biostatistics; health services administration; public health policy; journal” and “Algeria; Bahrain; Comoros; Djibouti; Egypt; Iraq; Jordan; Kuwait; Lebanon; Libya; Mauritania; Morocco; Oman; Qatar; Saudi Arabia; Somalia; Sudan; Syria; Tunisia; United Arab Emirates; Yemen; Palestinian Territories.” Using an electronic appraisal of the search results, we identified the corresponding journal’s website.

We used each journal’s website to find the publication period and other information: was the journal active and in what languages it was available? We compiled and tabulated these results. For the purpose of our search, we defined a public health journal as a peer-reviewed journal encompassing any or all core disciplines of public health—biostatistics, epidemiology, health services administration, health policy, health education and promotion, behavioral health, and environmental health. Given the nature of our study, no ethical approval or clearance was necessary and, therefore, not obtained.

Inclusion/exclusion criteria

We included in our search, journals that explicitly placed public health or its core disciplines in the journal’s aims and scope. Only peer-reviewed journals were included. To provide a comprehensive snapshot for discussion purposes, we included ‘active’ and ‘interrupted’ or no longer published journals in the search results. Given the predominant

languages used in this region — Arabic, English, and French — we used search terms in each. We excluded journals with a clearly stated primary aim and scope focusing on human medicine, veterinary medicine, nursing, and other discipline-specific health professions. We recognize that some valuable and applicable data may have been excluded as a result of this delimitation.

Results

Our electronic search returned 25 public health journals in Arabic-speaking countries; 20 journals maintain an active publication schedule (Table 1). Among all journals, Saudi Arabia was represented six times, Egypt was represented five times, Sudan was represented three times, and no other country was represented more than twice. All 20 currently active journals are available in English. Three are available in English and Arabic (*Assiut University Bulletin for Environmental Researches*, *Damascus University Journal for Health Sciences*, and *Gezira Journal of Health Sciences*). One is available in English and French (*Revue Tunisienne d'Infectiologie*), and one is available in all three languages (*Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal*). All but three (*Journal of the Egyptian Public Health Association*, *Revue Tunisienne d'Infectiologie*, and *Journal of Infection and Public Health*) offer open access to online readers without financial, legal, or technical barriers. Among currently active journals, four had a publication history of greater than 20 years (*Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal*, *Journal of High Institute of Public Health; Medical Principles and Practice*; and *The Journal of Family and Community Medicine*) and 13 have been active for 10 years or less. Twelve Arabic-speaking countries and the Palestinian territories do not presently offer a current active public health journal.

Discussion

In Arabic-speaking countries, articles about public health are frequently incorporated in journals not directly focused on public health or its core disciplines, such as those aimed at human medicine, veterinary medicine, nursing, and other discipline-specific health professions. Yet there is a clear distinction between public health and



Table 1: List of selected Public Health Journals in Arabic-speaking countries

<i>Journal Name</i>	<i>Publication period^a</i>	<i>Activity status</i>	<i>Country origin</i>	<i>Language^b</i>	<i>Print format^{c,d}</i>	<i>Open access^d</i>	<i>I.F.^e</i>
Assiut University Bulletin for Environmental Researches	2008–2015	Current	Egypt	Eng; Ara	Electronic	Yes	N/A
Bulletin of Endemic Disease-Baghdad	1954–1989	Interrupted/ ceased	Iraq	Eng	Paper	N/A	N/A
Damascus University Journal for Health Sciences	1999–2015	Current	Syria	Eng; Ara	Electronic	Yes	N/A
Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal	1995–present	Current	Egypt	Eng; Ara; Fre	Both	Yes	0.663
Egyptian Journal of Schistosomiasis and Infectious and Endemic Diseases	1981–2005	Interrupted/ ceased	Egypt	Eng	N/A	N/A	N/A
Gezira Journal of Health Sciences	2003–2014	Current	Sudan	Eng; Ara	Electronic	Yes	N/A
Iraqi Journal of Tropical Disease Researches	2004–2005	Interrupted/ ceased	Iraq	Eng; Ara	N/A	N/A	N/A
Journal of High Institute of Public Health ^f	1981–2005; 2007–2015	Current	Egypt	Eng	Both	Yes	N/A
Journal of the Egyptian Public Health Association	2008–present	Current	Egypt	Eng	Both	No	N/A
Libyan Journal of Infectious Diseases	2007–2008	Interrupted/ ceased	Libya	Eng	N/A	N/A	N/A
Medical Principles and Practice	1989–present	Current	Kuwait	Eng	Both	Yes	1.159
Revue Tunisienne d'Infectiologie	2007–2015	Current	Tunisia	Eng; Fre	Both	No	N/A
Saudi Journal of Health Sciences	2012–present	Current	Saudi Arabia	Eng	Both	Yes	N/A
Sudanese Journal of Public Health	2006–2014	Interrupted/ ceased	Sudan	Eng; Ara	Both	Yes	N/A
The Journal of Epidemiology and Global Health	2011–present	Current	Saudi Arabia	Eng	Both	Yes	N/A
International Journal of Health Sciences	2007–present	Current	Saudi Arabia	Eng	Electronic	Yes	N/A
Journal of Infection and Public Health	2008–present	Current	Saudi Arabia	Eng	Both	No	1.194
The Middle East Journal of Family Medicine	2003–present	Current	Lebanon	Eng	Electronic	Yes	10.1275

Table 1: *Continued*

<i>Journal Name</i>	<i>Publication period^a</i>	<i>Activity status</i>	<i>Country origin</i>	<i>Language^b</i>	<i>Print format^{c,d}</i>	<i>Open access^d</i>	<i>I.F.^e</i>
The Journal of Family and Community Medicine	1994–present	Current	Saudi Arabia	Eng	Both	Yes	N/A
Saudi Journal of Medicine and Medical Sciences	2013–present	Current	Saudi Arabia	Eng	Both	Yes	N/A
Yemeni Journal for Medical Sciences	2007–present	Current	Yemen	Eng	Electronic	Yes	N/A
Avicenna Journal of Medicine	2011–present	Current	Cooperative—Syria/ USA/Saudi Arabia	Eng	Both	Yes	N/A
Libyan Journal of Medicine	2006–present	Current	Cooperative—Libya/ Sweden	Eng	Electronic	Yes	1.429
Avicenna	2010–present	Current	Qatar	Eng	Electronic	Yes	N/A
Sudan Journal of Medical Sciences	2006–present	Current	Sudan	Eng	Electronic	Yes	N/A

^aInformation obtained from electronic database records.

^bEng English; Ara Arabic; Fre French.

^cPaper; electronic; Both.

^dN/A information not available.

^eI.F. impact factor (2015–2016).

^fPreviously published as Bulletin of High Institute of Public Health.



clinical medicine seen at the level of intervention (population vs. individual).²² Consequently, public health articles would be more likely to reach public health professionals if presented in a forum specifically aimed at public health professionals.

Earlier analyses^{15,16} have reported more than 400 medical and biomedical journals active in the Middle East and published in several regional languages including Arabic, Hebrew, Turkish, and Farsi. Yet, many of these journals are infrequently cited, have low impact factors, or none is reported. They are not indexed in major bibliographic databases such as PubMed, Scopus, or ScienceDirect.

Although the medical and biomedical fields overlap with public health disciplines, dedicated support systems expressly focused on public health to help explain past findings, assist current efforts, and predict future needs in public health. Furthermore, of the 20 public health journals available in the Arabic-speaking region, only 11 are printed for conventional print circulation. This further limits access options for some public health practitioners, as we discuss below.

Sixteen of the 20 active journals available electronically and ten of the 11 active journals available in print are published in a single non-native language (English). This may considerably reduce readability and effective use. Two of the five journals that have ceased publication were also available in Arabic. Although a unifying language incorporates a strategic advantage for journal publishers as an industry, it is presumptuous to assume that individual agencies and their practitioners at the local and community levels can accommodate the publisher's choice. Given the large population within the Arabic-speaking region whose members prefer to receive health information in their native tongue,^{23,24} a scarcity of available public health journals has adverse consequences. Limiting health information by an English-only policy could impede community- and population-level practitioners and their ability to deliver public health information and services to target populations.

Globally, English is considered the primary language and is used in approximately 80 per cent of academic and research journals.²⁵ However, in developing regions where English is not the primary language of public health practitioners or their target populations, the transition to English as the primary way to deliver written resources should evolve in time and reflect the populations they intend to serve.

Open access is valuable in academic research and the public health community, but the Arabic-speaking region ranks lower than English-speaking regions in internet access (52.2 per cent vs. 87.9 per cent) and electronic literacy.²⁶ Of the 20 active journals in the Arabic-speaking region, nine are an electronic resource only. Exclusive online access to contemporary public health research without in-print availability could be viewed as further marginalizing of Arabic-speaking populations. Publishers of existing journals and new start-ups should consider open access as an option — much like including English as an option — after providing the journal in print using the native (or preferred) language. Offering valuable research designed to support the Arabic-speaking region in English and online serves only a select few, and could exclude populations in need and the public health professionals who serve them.

Conclusion

While there does not appear to be a deficiency in current active medical and biomedical journals in the Arabic-speaking region,^{15,18,27} the development and promotion of public health journals appear warranted. This recommendation particularly applies in low-income regions where native public health researchers may not have the wide-reaching access and availability of public health journals and databases readily found in middle-to-high income countries. While native public health researchers in lower-income, resource-poor countries concentrate their efforts on public health problems in their countries, local publishing vehicles may not be readily available. They have limited international readership and garner few citations from public health researchers in more developed nations. The introduction of dedicated local and regional public health journals that transcend borders and boundaries will require focused efforts. Strategic goals must be agreed upon by public health researchers and policymakers.

Turmoil in the region and lack of infrastructure may mean that only particular publications survive. This may explain the important structural factors affecting public health research. As we observed in two journals: *Avicenna Journal of Medicine* and *Libyan Journal of Medicine*, the benefits of sustainable collaborative institutional and international partnerships^{28,29} can be extended between high-income



Non-Arabic and Arabic-speaking countries with middle- and poor-income counterparts. A collaborative approach would help foster the launch of local public health journals, addressing the low scholarly output and research infrastructure of middle- and low-income countries and bridging the gap between research activity and reporting of it in resource-poor settings.

Region-wide public health journals such as the *Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal* could serve as ideal models worthy of emulation for emerging local and regional public health journals in the Arabic-speaking world. The *Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal* publishes in multiple region-specific languages (Arabic, English, and French), is indexed in major bibliographic databases, is available in print and electronic open access, and has an encompassing scope of public health interest in 19 of the 22 Arabic-speaking countries cited in our report.³⁰ The recommendations offered in this brief report could help promote peer-reviewed public health journalism, research, and public health standards in the Arabic-speaking region.

Limitations

Our report is intended to present an overview of available public health journals in the Arabic-speaking region. While we searched several electronic resources and databases using key search terms and phrases, our methods may have missed some journals. Also, some journals not indexed in electronic databases may have been missed in the search.

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