

ROLE OF REGULATORY BODIES IN IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF MEDICAL JOURNALS OF PAKISTAN

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History of medical journals in Pakistan can be traced back to 1953, when the 1st issue of "Journal of the Pakistan Medical Association" (JPMA) was published. Over the years, exponential growth of medical journals was observed in Pakistan along with increasing number of medical colleges and professional societies of various specialities. There are 79 medical journals available on Pakmedinet, largest database of medical journals in Pakistan¹ and 72 journals are included in Index Pakistan, maintained by Pakistan Medical & Dental Council (PMDC).² Higher Education commission (HEC) Pakistan has recognized 47 health journals including 4 journals in W category, 5 in X category, 23 in Y and 15 in Z category.³ Every year, new medical journals are published and are in pipeline to be evaluated and recognized by PMDC & HEC. However, despite an increase in number of the journals, quality of medical journals in Pakistan is not improving. There are only four biomedical journals indexed in Medline and four medical journals are having "impact factor" as per "Journal Citation Reports" published by Thomson Reuter.

Both PMDC & HEC, working as regulatory bodies are responsible to monitor and facilitate quality of medical journals in Pakistan. PM & DC is a statutory regulatory authority for regulating medical education and medical practice in Pakistan. It has also been given a mandate to regulate and recognize medical journals to be

included in "Index Pakistan." In Pakistan, a particular number of publications are required to be published in "PMDC recognized journals" as a pre-requisite for promotion to higher academic posts in medical & dental colleges. The journal's affairs are run by "PMDC Journals Committee" which is responsible for recognition of journals and for setting standards for medical journals.

HEC is another prestigious and autonomous institution responsible for regulating, and accrediting the higher education institutions and universities in Pakistan. Quality assurance division of HEC has uplifted higher education in Pakistan by adopting international standards in evaluation of postgraduate institution and bringing excellence in teaching, learning and research. Aiming to improve the quality of research in Pakistan, QA division of HEC has been given the task to evaluate the quality of research journals in science (including health sciences), social sciences, arts and humanities and business education. Journals are evaluated by HEC subject-wise journal's committee, in the light of a set criteria and are categorized as W, X, Y and Z category, based on impact factor, international indexation and peer review system.

There is no doubt that both PMDC & HEC are somehow serving the cause of improving the quality of medical journals in Pakistan, by setting minimum standards, making it mandatory for the

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editors to maintain these standards to be recognized by these bodies. However, editors of the medical journals have shown concerns and reservation regarding role of regulatory bodies in improving the quality of medical journals in Pakistan.⁴⁻⁷ PMDC journal's committee started well and developed "Essential Guidelines for Authors, Reviewers and Editors of Medical and Dental Journals" in 2003⁸ and set a criteria for recognition of journals.⁹ However, since then, this committee has not performed well as per expectations. Committee membership in the past included nonprofessional persons having no background or experience of editing a medical journal.¹⁰ Meetings of the evaluation committee are not held frequently as per defined protocol, causing prolong delay in evaluation of new journals. Dozens of journals are evaluated in a single meeting and at times PMDC criteria is not followed in letter and spirit. Unlike HEC criteria, PMDC criteria is deficient in categorizing journals qualitatively and internationally indexed journal with impact factor is not given any credit over a poor quality journal fulfilling the minimal requirement to be recognized by PMDC.

Until recently, there was no dedicated section in PMDC to look after the medical journals. Although, in papers a separate section has been established, there is no proper record keeping of the journals submitted to PMDC. In HEC, QA division is dealing with all research journals in science, and other disciplines. HEC has assigned separate deputy directors to deal with journals of science and social sciences and their names and contact details are given on HEC website.¹¹ While in PMDC, no contact details of the section in-charge are visible on its website, making it difficult for the editors to coordinate with the concerned section.

Beside regulatory role, both PMDC and HEC are responsible to improve the quality of published research by providing training facilities to the editors, reviewers and authors on regular basis. Both HEC & PMDC failed to provide any training workshops, seminars and conferences in improving medical journals in Pakistan. So far, HEC has conducted only a single workshop for science and biomedical journals on online and open journal system in 2009.¹² Although this role is being played by some professional organizations of medical editors like Pakistan Association of Medical Editors (PAME), Eastern Mediterranean Association of Medical Editors (EMAME) and World Association of Medical Editors (WAME), HEC and PMDC have not developed liaison with these organizations to serve the common purpose. These organizations have organized several regional, national and international conferences, workshops and seminars for the editors, reviewers and authors in the past and are going to arrange one major event in April 1-2, 2016 at Lahore.¹³ Both PMDC & HEC should support and arrange such activities in collaboration with PAME, EMAME & WAME. Representation of PAME in journals recognition committees of PMDC and HEC will help in improving the evaluation process of medical journals in future.

Plagiarism screening is a prerequisite of both HEC & PMDC, and editors have to submit Turnitin check report for each article for journals recognitions by HEC & PMDC. However, both these organizations have not provided free access to Turnitin software to the editors of medical journals. HEC has promised on several occasions to do so but has not fulfilled its promise, so far.^{14,15} HEC &

PMDC should also try to provide free access to XML files tagging software to the journals. This will help in inclusion of their journals in PubMed Central and visibility in PubMed database and hence increasing their citation rates. We must appreciate the financial assistance policy of HEC for its recognized journals and at the same time expect that PMDC will also take an initiative to provide some financial assistance to PMDC recognized journals as well.

There is a strong need of developing a mutual cooperation between HEC & PMDC in facilitating and regulating medical journals in Pakistan. Both these bodies should also develop close liaison with PAME and other organizations to provide training facilities for the editors, reviewers and potential authors in all fields of medical sciences. There is no doubt that together we can serve the purpose of improving the quality of published biomedical research and medical journals in Pakistan.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare no conflict of interest

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