

EDITORIAL

IMPROVING QUALITY OF THE ETHIOPIAN MEDICAL JOURNAL: CURRENT CHALLENGES TO CHANGING THE TIDE

Many journals focusing on health have fairly similar missions which revolve around publishing and disseminating scientifically rigorous health information of national or international significance that enables policy-makers, researchers and practitioners to be more effective (1) or, expressed in simple and clear terms, 'delivering science for better health' (2). In keeping with the aims and objectives a scientific journal, the *Ethiopian Medical Journal (EMJ)*, the official organ of the Ethiopian Medical Association (EMA), has been publishing papers based on original research and other observations of relevance to clinical medicine and public health in Ethiopia since 1962 (3). Indeed, it is gratifying to see that the Journal has played a key role in disseminating timely and relevant information in Ethiopia and beyond (4,5).

Like most scientific and scholarly journals, the EMJ has always had, as one of its main preoccupations, the quality of information disseminated through each issue of the Journal. While there has been much success in this regard, many challenges have remained a threat to ascertaining quality of information published in the EMJ. Owing to the lack of strong research capacity in the country, EMJ receives limited numbers of original articles based on extensive works employing rigorous methodologies. Oftentimes, the choice is made from among papers on less extensive works employing non-rigorous methods. In contrast to the situation with journals like *The Lancet* and *The New England Journal of Medicine* with stark high impact factor rejecting some 90% of submissions they receive (6), the rejection rate at the EMJ, out of necessity, remains low.

EMJ capitalizes on peer reviewing or editorial refereeing to qualify content and select articles for publication. Ensuring quality peer reviewing and maintaining selection standards have for long posed major challenges to the Journal. Owing to the shortage in skilled, experienced and well-motivated reviewers, the reviewing of manuscripts is, more often than not, less intensive and not adequately critical. The turn-around time in the review process, by and large, is lengthy and a paper may undergo a series of reviews, revisions and re-submissions before finally being accepted or rejected. There is often a delay of many months before an accepted manuscript appears. This is also true for the most popular journals, but for a different reason, the number of accepted articles often outstripping the space for printing (7).

The inadequate number of knowledgeable individuals interested and committed to serve in positions of editorial responsibilities has also compounded the challenges to ensuring quality and timely publication of EMJ. Validation of accuracy of data sets forming the basis of articles submitted for publication and ensuring that authors observe best practices in ethics are largely the responsibility of the authors and their respective institutions. Individual and institutional capacity to ascertain technical and ethical standards and guard against conflicts of interest need to be developed. While in-service training in these areas has been initiated by EMJ, constraints with resources have limited the journal's effort to taking it to the desired scale and quality.

In spite of all the challenges, some of them enduring over the years, EMJ has been able to publish almost all of its quarterly publications for over 50 years. The dedication of many physicians and basic scientists to doing research in conditions that are often not that conducive and their commitment to contributing articles to EMJ has been quite remarkable. Reviewers- not hindered by busy work schedules and other limitations- have supported the journal by doing the painstaking work of reviewing manuscripts; EMJ applauds their mammoth achievement. Likewise, generations of editors and editorial boards have served EMJ with unyielding determination. Their collective hard work and innovative leadership have ensured regular publication of EMJ and its international recognition. EMA has nurtured the Journal by creating an optimal environment and securing the finances for its publication. We wish to thank EMA and funding institutions and organizations.

In the coming years, EMJ needs to fully exploit all available opportunities to sustain the achievements to date and continue fostering research through publications on health issues of relevance to Ethiopia and the region. Structural and functional reforms are required to enable it meet current and future demands related to acquisition, processing, publication and dissemination of research outputs and their translation into action. While strengthening and optimizing its recent initiatives on electronic publishing, EMJ will still need to work more systematically to improve the quality and increase the distribution network for EMJ publication in the print format. Continuous improvement in relevant guidelines would be needed to support authors, editors and reviewers to keep up with rapidly changing global situations.

Systems to support the engagement of young physicians and early-career scientists to use EMJ as their outlet for reporting their research results need to be established. It is particularly important that senior researchers lead by example in submitting high quality manuscripts to the EMJ so that the impact of the Journal is strengthened. The recent increase in health research publications from Ethiopia in the global literature augurs well for the future of EMJ. The Journal is well positioned to take advantage of these opportunities and build on its experience of the past decades to sustain itself as one of the leading sources of quality health research information in Ethiopia. EMJ calls for a closer and stronger engagement of health researchers and encourages them to use the Journal as their forum for disseminating research information to stakeholders in Ethiopia and the Region.

REFERENCES

1. Bulletin of the World Health Organization 2011;89:79-80. doi: 10.2471/BLT.11.000011
2. Horton R. Our Aims and Objectives. The Lancet. <http://www.thelancet.com/about-us>
3. Ethiopian Medical Journal 1962;1(1).
4. Sileshi Lulseged. Editorial: In the Footsteps of Dr. Johan F. Otto and Dr. Oscar B. Barry. Ethiop Med J 2002;40(3).
5. Fikre Enquasselassie: Editorial: Ethiopia Medical Journal – An overview assessment of the last 50 years. Ethiop Med J 2002;50(1)
6. Ethics: What is it for? Analyzing the purpose of peer review. <http://www.nature.com/nature/peerreview/debate/nature04990.html>
7. Björk BC and Solomon D. The publishing delay in scholarly peer-reviewed journals. <http://openaccesspublishing.org/oa11/article.pdf>.

Sileshi Lulseged, M.D, MMed.