Editorial and Publication Processes in Developing and Newly Industrialized Nations

Moderator:
Ingrid Philibert
Senior Vice President, Department of Field Activities and Managing Editor, Journal of Graduate Medical Education Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education Chicago, Illinois

Speakers:
James Tumwine
Editor-in-Chief, African Health Sciences, School of Medicine, College of Health Sciences, Makerere University Kampala, Uganda

Lila Castelanos Serra
Former Executive Editor, Journal Biotecnologia Aplicada; Former Head, Department of Proteomics, Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, Havana; Member of the Cuban Academy of Sciences and TWAS (The World Academy of Sciences) Havana, Cuba

Reporters:
Kimberly Rosenfield
Manuscript Coordinator American Society for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition Washington, DC

Innovation, perseverance, and positivity were the key takeaways during this dynamic breakout session on editorial and publication practices in developing and newly industrialized nations. Speakers James Tumwine and Lila Castelanos Serra explained that, unlike editorial offices in industrialized countries, those in developing nations have a host of unique roadblocks that they must overcome to operate and promote successful publications. Despite innumerable challenges, many journals have been able to sustain and grow through innovative methods that foster high-quality editorial teams, submissions, and journal visibility through continued education of staff and editors.

Tumwine chronicled the struggles and success in establishing a peer-reviewed journal in Africa. With modest facilities for publishing African medical research, Tumwine was inspired to develop an African-led publication that would bring attention to African health issues and, with it, better health practices in Africa. Founded in 2001, African Health Sciences has become Uganda’s only MEDLINE indexed journal. It has overcome numerous challenges, including a lack of funding and human resources, which Tumwine has met by fostering the relationships and enhancing the skills of his journal staff and editorial board.

Often working without pay and with too few personnel, staff are encouraged to apply their varied backgrounds and knowledge to a variety of editorial roles. Education is important. Tumwine has introduced the practice of training medical students, at both undergraduate and graduate levels, in the methodological principles of scientific inquiry and communication. Integration of research and publication principles into the regular curriculum will help to prepare medical students to do research, write and express their research, and serve as competent editors and reviewers.

Serra spoke about the challenges that Cuban medical publishers have in producing journals with an international impact and high-quality submissions. While leading La Editorial Ciencias Médicas (ECIMED), the national publisher of university medical journals, Serra faced a number of obstacles. Despite being one of the leading scientific publishers in Latin America, ECIMED has struggled; its presence in international repositories and databases is increasing every year, but its citation rate remains low. Serra points to a number of reasons why this is the case: low-quality manuscript preparation and submissions, non-functional editorial boards, and poor reviewers.

Serra has engaged in education efforts among editors and reviewers that have included training courses, discussion forums, and meetings in which editors are able to exchange ideas and discuss how to integrate international trends into their workflow to create journals of worldwide relevance. Equally important is the accountability of reviewers. From the start, reviewers with a high h-index (a metric that reflects the reviewer’s number of publications and number of citations per publication) are selected, and their performance is evaluated throughout the course of their participation. Good reviewers are socially recognized through letters to them or their institutions. Serra has also encouraged ECIMED journals to tighten journal submission requirements and lower their manuscript-acceptance rates.

Developing countries, by and large, have a steep hill to climb in establishing successful academic journals. Lack of staff and an excess of subpar editors, reviewers, and submissions have created the need for developing countries to find innovative methods to overcome and thrive. Tumwine and Serra both credit “thinking outside the box” in how they manage their production and train and educate their staff with the success of their journals. Ultimately, a better understanding of scientific communication principles will help these journals to inform readers about medical and science issues related to their countries.

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