

Addressing English-Language Bias in Science: How Journals Can Support Authors Whose Native Language Is Not English

Chair:

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Moderator:

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Panelists:

Ana Marusic
Croatian Medical Journal
Zagreb, Croatia

Daniel Ncayiyana
South African Medical Journal
Cape Town, South Africa

John Overbeke
Dutch Medical Journal
Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Reporter:

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If English is the language of science, are authors not fluent in English at a disadvantage? What can journals do to support them? The panelists, all journal editors and members of the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME; www.wame.org), addressed these issues.

John Overbeke described medical publishing in the Netherlands. In the 1980s, recognizing that little medical research conducted in the Netherlands was published in English-language journals, the Dutch government urged clinicians to publish in more frequently cited journals. Within 10 years, Dutch clinical reports published in English-

language journals increased considerably. Unfortunately, the gain coincided with a sharp decline in submissions to the *Dutch Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde*.

Ana Marusic, editor of the English-language *Croatian Medical Journal*, described problems that keep small journals in semideveloped countries on the scientific periphery. Marusic thinks language is but one of several factors contributing to a “vicious circle of inadequacy”, including low visibility and the dearth of authors, reviewers, subscribers, and advertisers. The *Croatian Medical Journal* staff helps authors prepare their work for publication in the journal. To reach future authors, the journal developed a course, “Introduction to Research in Medicine”, now mandatory for second-year students at the Zagreb Medical School.

Daniel Ncayiyana discussed the reviewer’s perspective and whether bias plays a role in the consideration of medical manuscripts. The *South African Medical Journal*, published in English, receives submissions from several countries where English is a foreign language. If a manuscript is deemed incoherent, it is rejected outright. If a manuscript is considered coherent and its content new or important, the question becomes whether the submission can be edited without putting words into the author’s mouth. If the answer is yes, the manuscript is edited in-house; if not, it is returned to the authors, who are instructed to seek assistance from an English-language editor and then resubmit their manuscript.

Ncayiyana’s experience with in-house editing was echoed by that of Michael L Callaham, editor of the *Annals of Emergency Medicine*. His journal receives modest numbers of manuscripts from countries where English is not the first language and occasionally solicits manuscripts about emergency medicine in such countries.

Noting wryly that badly written papers

come from both American authors and authors less fluent in English, Callaham is willing to work with authors to salvage material and make it publishable, but he did note that the process is “incredibly labor intensive”.

During open discussion other issues were raised, including the perception of an international bias in favor of not only the English language, but also the subject matter of mainstream medical journals. Bias can also originate with small countries’ authors themselves, who believe that their work will not be published in “outside” journals without their having a mentor.

Several suggestions were made to address those problems. Journal editors can help to quantify the perception of bias against authors and ideas not in the mainstream by analyzing the rejections recommended by their reviewers. Journals can encourage reviewers not to discriminate on the basis of language or other cultural factors, and they can grade reviews on the basis of constructive criticism offered. Masked copies of reviewers’ comments can be shared among reviewers. Journals might encourage research institutions to consider employing or contracting with author’s editors or providing their scientists with access to rosters of editors who have expertise in the subject matter.

Take-home messages from the session were that at least a perception of bias exists in scientific publication, that each journal must decide how much help it can afford to give authors, that peer reviewers can be encouraged to view their reviews as collaborative efforts with the authors and can be taught to avoid discrimination based on language or cultural differences, and that journal editors can make use of collegial resources (such as WAME) to help in addressing these complex problems. 