

World Health Organization Meeting Held to Support Editors of African Medical Journals

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Surrounded by international organizations dedicated to helping humanity, the World Health Organization (WHO) in multicultural Geneva, Switzerland, was the site and host of a seminal meeting in October 2002 to assist African medical journals. The meeting was hosted by the WHO Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Disease (TDR) and organized by Fabio Zicker, Edith Certain, and Hoomen Momen (CSE member and editor of the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*). The objective of the meeting was to bring together editors of African medical journals with those from the North—editors, publishers, librarians, representatives of such professional societies as CSE and the World Association of Medical Editors, and others interested in improving the quality of medical information—to review the current state of African medical journals and to improve the quality and visibility of the journals and of African medical science.

The meeting began with a review of the state of African medical journals. At least 100 medical journals are published in 26 African countries. The oldest medical journal in Africa, the *South African Medical Journal*, currently led by CSE member Dan Ncayiyana as editor, was begun in 1884, coincidentally the year of the Berlin conference on the “Scramble for Africa”, the climax of the European imperialistic colonization of Africa.

According to a survey of 66 African medical journal editors conducted by WHO's Edith Certain, most African medical journals are owned by academic institutions, have small circulations (24 journals

have circulations under 5000), lack adequate funding, have difficulty in maintaining publication frequency, are peer-reviewed, have high acceptance rates (over 60%), publish new research, and are rarely indexed in major databases. Most of the editors who replied to the survey reported that they have access to the Internet, use e-mail regularly, and would welcome training and access to an electronic network of other editors. Questions that were raised by the survey and workshop participants included these: Is lack of visibility of African medical journals a result only of economic and physical constraints? Can improved peer review and editorial practices bring about international recognition? How can editors persuade African medical researchers to publish in African journals? A number of the participants agreed that Africa needs to have international medical journals that are visible to and contributed to by Africans, and that are read by Africans as well as by the rest of the world.

Access to African medical literature, however, is limited by resource constraints of African journals and publishers, difficulties in maintaining publication schedules, distribution problems, the need for training of editors and publishers, and failure of most journals to be included in major bibliometric databases, such as MEDLINE. The African Index Medicus, a database of African literature, has ceased to operate, although there were strong calls from the participants for the relaunching of this important regional database.

With a population of about 700 million, Africa is a vast continent with enormous but untapped potential. In fact, if maps were cut and pasted, the African continent would accommodate the United States (minus Alaska), Europe, the British Isles, India, Japan, and New Zealand—and



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those countries would occupy only some 64% of the continent's land mass. Africa has 53 sovereign states in various stages of socioeconomic development. Except for a handful of countries, the continent has a poor infrastructure, such as air, road, and rail transportation; postal system; and telephone and electronic communication.

Aware of the complexity of the African continent and the commonality of constraints affecting publication of medical journals in Africa, the meeting participants were unanimous in calling for the creation of mechanisms for the coordination of activities related to medical journals. The establishment of the Forum for African Medical Editors (FAME) was proposed and unanimously endorsed by the African journal editors.

The immediate task of FAME is to set priorities among the issues raised and to attempt to provide solutions. James Tumwine, editor of *African Health Sciences* and a member of the faculty of medicine of Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, will serve as chair for FAME, and Davy Koech, editor of the *African Journal of Health Sciences* and director of the Kenya Medical Research Institute, will act as secretary. A steering committee of FAME was formed to set the new organization's agenda, mission, and objectives. The committee scheduled its first formal meeting for February 2003 in Nairobi. 📍

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