

Indian Journal Marks Golden Jubilee with International Conference

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The *Journal of Postgraduate Medicine (JPGM)*, a peer-reviewed journal published by the Staff Society of Seth Gordhandas Sunderdas Medical College and King Edward Memorial Hospital, Mumbai (Bombay), India, celebrated 50 years of existence fittingly by organizing JPGM GoldCon, an international conference on medical writing, editing, and publishing on 23-26 September 2004 in Mumbai. JPGM was the first indexed journal published by any medical college in India. Nilima Kshirsagar, the patron and the dean of the twin institutions, and Vijaysinh Patankar, the additional municipal commissioner, both summarized the purpose of this conference and stated that research is not complete unless its findings are disseminated to the entire scientific community. Hence, if we have to provide an impetus to research, we have to train researchers to write better, train editors so that they bring out high-quality journals and are aware of the challenges faced by medical journals and the publishing industry, and inform the scientific community at large about the hindrances faced in disseminating scientific data and knowledge.

The conference began with a unique presentation “by the students, for the students” from the enthusiastic undergraduate

students of the medical college. They deliberated on the issue of the accuracy, reliability, and authenticity of the information available on the Internet and the guidance to be provided to patients in this regard. The topic of conducting research even as undergraduates was also emphasized, and the presentation provided information about avenues for getting financial support from various universities and government organizations.

More than 400 delegates and faculty members from 11 countries attended the conference, giving it a truly international flavor. It focused on the authors’ perspective, the editors’ perspective, and the open-access (OA) initiative. S K Pandya, former professor of neurosurgery, in his keynote address, “The Purpose of Scientific Writing”, lamented that the original concept of undertaking scientific writing for sharing ideas, provoking new thoughts, and expanding understanding is being relegated to the background, and scientific writing is increasingly embarked on for the advancement of careers. He also bemoaned that technologic advancement is aiding the phenomenon and resulting in an explosion of “information”. He ended his talk by informing his audience that Ambrose Bierce defined *ink* in *The Devil’s Dictionary* as a “villainous compound of tanno-gallate of iron, gum-Arabic and water, chiefly used to facilitate the infection of idiocy and promote intellectual crime”. Tomorrow’s authors, it is hoped, will move away from that definition.

R D Lele, former dean and professor and head of general medicine, Grant Medical College, Mumbai, spoke on “The Future of Scientific Publishing” and stated that the technologic revolution is acting as a double-edged weapon: it has empowered scientists with easy access to information but has also made it easier for the less scrupulous ones to indulge in unethical

practices, such as plagiarism. For the written word to maintain its credibility, it is essential that scientists make correct use of technology.

Interaction among the lay press, readers, and medical professionals was discussed in a panel discussion chaired by Nilima Kshirsagar. The panelists stated that the message should be kept simple and “deja-gonized” in communication with the general public and editors should make it a point to explain important articles in the journal to the lay public. Some panelists expressed the view that the lay press, while reporting events and mishaps, should provide a balanced view and should move away from the habit of sensationalizing issues with an eye to increasing subscription. In addition, dramatization and exaggeration of events are not in the community’s long-term interests, and sensitive researchers and practitioners would shun the communities that carry out “trial by media”.

The editors’ perspective on authors’ training, authorship and ethical issues, resource generation, and improvement in editorial processes was discussed. The important peer-review process was discussed at length. Although the process is plagued by lacunae and despite lack of evidence of its consistent effectiveness, editors and journal managers should improvise to make the peer-review system more efficient, effective, and manageable, because it is the only process that ensures quality control. Most biomedical journals in India are published without using the services of a professional publisher. That is contrary to the trend in other parts of the world. Deepraj Bhandarkar, editor of the *Journal of Minimal Access Surgery*, and Philip Abraham, editor of the *Indian Journal of Gastroenterology*, debated the pros and cons of enlisting the services of a professional publisher. Bhandarkar listed the advantages of such an association:

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assistance in editorial processes, improvement in the overall quality of the journal, providing guidance regarding indexing, enhancing journal visibility, assistance in Web-site and manuscript management, and support in resource generation. Abraham put forward the view that association with a publisher comes for a price, which most often is exorbitant. The debate ended with the view that a publisher could help to improve a journal if selected with great care and if there is an understanding between the publisher and the editorial board about each other's responsibilities, roles, and difficulties.

The last day of the conference was devoted to the OA initiative. Subbiah Arunachalam, MS Swaminathan Research Foundation, Chennai, India, underlined the fundamental importance of access to information by pointing out that bright, dedicated, and focused people can do high-quality research in well-equipped laboratories if they have access to the most recent information. For scientists participating in biomedical research, peer-reviewed journals are the most important source of information. However, access to the literature is not uniform, and the soaring costs of journals and dwindling budgets of libraries are impeding access to this vital source. That more and more knowledge is going out of the public domain is also a matter of grave concern. He pointed out that in this era of communication, in which technology has empowered us to share knowledge and information almost instantaneously, we should ensure that we do not help to build monopolistic kingdoms, but have an environment that encourages sharing of knowledge. Open-access archiving is the way out.

Stevan Harnad, Canada, showed that OA is beneficial to everyone: It helps to increase the impact of research, and more impact translates into more research projects coming to an institution. For society at large, it means more researchers stimulated

to carry out further studies. He stated that there are two ways to achieve that: the "golden route" and the "green route". The golden route—OA publishing—entails convincing publishers of all the 23 000 biomedical journals to subscribe to OA or to convince the researchers who produce 2.5 million manuscripts a year to submit their manuscripts only to journals that allow free access to full-text research articles. The green route refers to OA archiving, in which researchers archive their research papers (postprinting, the version that has been peer-reviewed and accepted by journals for publication) on their own Web sites or on university Web sites and allowing everyone access to these sites. The green route is far more effective, is more likely to succeed, and can be implemented straightaway; and it does not infringe on copyright. Harnad speculated that self-archiving, being a slow and chaotic process, would not result in journals' closing shop. And the initiative would save a lot of money for colleges, universities, and researchers!

The impact of OA on the financial health of the journals and publishers was discussed by Hooman Momen, editor of the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, and Pritpal Tamber, BioMed Central, UK. They pointed out that many fear that an OA system that allows everyone to access research findings free of cost would lead to many biomedical journals' closing down. There is no doubt that the financial equations will have to be worked out. However, various economic models could be used for sustaining the journals. The journals could expect one or several of the following components to pay for the OA provided to readers: author, author's institution, national research council, philanthropic organization, and funding agency. One novel idea would be to make readers pay for other forms of articles (reviews, editorials, news, notes, discussion forums, and so on) available online while

allowing everyone free access to full-text research articles.

The participants were apprised of the efforts made by the World Health Organization (WHO) in safeguarding the interests of resource-poor countries. WHO, in collaboration with participating publishers, provides free access to several journals to users in some resource-poor countries through the Health InterNetwork Access to Research Initiative (HINARI) and Access to Global Online Research in Agriculture (AGORA) initiative. Authors in those countries could also avail themselves of concessions even when a journal routinely requests authors to pay. A special session provided insight regarding the efforts taken in this regard in India and other developing countries. The efforts include establishment of the IndMED and MedIND databases by the Indian MEDLARS centers that are in the process of providing free access to articles published in Indian biomedical journals, efforts of the Indian Institute of Science in establishing an institutional repository for its scientists to archive their contributions, the Latin American Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) initiative wherein more than 260 journals participate, and the HINARI initiative that intends to strengthen the public health-care system in India by providing better access to high-quality information, facilitating faster collection of data and deeper analysis, and offering avenues to easier consultation among decision-makers.

The conference succeeded in informing the delegates about the various issues involved in medical writing, editing, and publishing. The true success of the conference will be judged on the basis of the impetus it gives to the OA initiative, and the organizers will feel gratified if the meeting succeeded in stimulating scientists, authors, and administrators of colleges and universities to further the objectives of the initiative. 🌐