

◆ AuthorAID Task Force

Moderator:

Iain E P Taylor

Davidsonia

University of British Columbia

Vancouver, British Columbia

Speaker:

Iain E P Taylor

University of British Columbia

Vancouver, British Columbia

Speaker:

Barbara Gastel

Texas A&M University

College Station, Texas

Reporter:

Noam Shores

Harvard Medical School

Boston, Massachusetts

“AuthorAID is a concept,” said Barbara Gastel. The concept is to promote the publishing of research done in developing countries by partnering researchers in those countries with scientists and editors who can help. In the first part of the session, Gastel, knowledge-community editor for AuthorAID@INASP, provided background on CSE’s AuthorAID Task Force project and described its recent activities.

Current bases of AuthorAID are the International Society for Environmental Epidemiology (ISEE) and the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP). AuthorAID@INASP is a pilot project begun in 2007. The main program components are mentoring (scientific and editorial), workshops on scientific writing, and freely available online resources. Careful evaluation of the components is considered key.

The first two AuthorAID@INASP workshops on scientific writing took place

in spring 2008. The first, in Ethiopia, was attended mostly by local researchers. The second, part of an International Foundation for Science writing workshop for water-resources researchers, was in Kenya and drew participants from throughout Africa. Presentation materials were given to participants, helping trainees to become future trainers.

An important element of AuthorAID@INASP is a Web site (www.authoraid.info) begun in 2008. The site contains information on AuthorAID, signup information for would-be mentors and mentorees, and resources. Gastel is responsible for much of the site’s content and is the author of a lively and informative blog on the site. An upgraded site (due for launch in summer 2008) will have additional features, including news items and event announcements, collaborative spaces for mentoring, and information on potential mentors.

Although mentoring is perhaps the most novel component of AuthorAID, it is the slowest to develop. As of the middle of May 2008, 26 mentor–mentoree pairs were “on record” through INASP. Gastel invited editors to be mentors for one or two manuscripts per year. (To volunteer, contact her at bgastel@cvm.tamu.edu.)

In part to identify needs that the mentoring system should address, the site developer conducted an online survey. Respondents included 112 prospective mentorees in 36 countries and 56 prospective mentors in 20 countries. Prospective mentorees expressed considerable interest in having mentors and would like answers to general questions and specialized advice from researchers in their fields. Statistical analysis was most commonly perceived as a major problem. Other kinds of help that mentorees want include finding suitable journals, understanding the

peer-review process, responding to referees’ comments, and writing manuscripts in English. Prospective mentors were mostly concerned that they could not deliver what was expected, and they wanted to make clear the type of mentoring that they could provide.

Iain Taylor, chair of CSE’s AuthorAID and EditorLink Task Forces, drew on his experience in China to outline issues important for editors–mentors. He argued that many authors simply do not know what a manuscript is and suggested that this problem underlies the widespread plagiarism in science. Taylor said that editor–author relationships must be handled with care. Because of the language gap, editors must make comments in clear, simple language. Often viewed by authors as authority figures, editors should ask authors to verify that revised text maintains its meaning. Taylor emphasized that “editing does not stop at submission” and observed that valuable help often comes through peer review.

Taylor repeatedly emphasized that it is not enough to start efforts, such as AuthorAID; one must persevere. He noted the need for a detailed plan for establishing trusting and productive editor–author relationships, ensuring availability of resources to authors and AIDers, and making a long-term commitment. In the words of his last slide: We must avoid the death trap—a big launch followed by capsizing for lack of sustainability. 🔥

Reference

1. Freeman P, Robbins A. Closing the “publishing gap” between rich and poor. *SciDev.Net* [Internet] 2005 September 2 [cited 2008 June 9]. Available from: www.scidev.net/en/opinions/closing-the-publishing-gap-between-rich-and-poor.html.