The Golden Jubilee Conference: the outcome, success and opportunities

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The Journal of Postgraduate Medicine (JPGM) celebrated 50 years of its existence by organizing JPGM GoldCon, an international conference on medical writing, editing and publishing at the Seth GS Medical College from 23rd-26th September 2004. JPGM was the first indexed journal published by any medical college in India. Fittingly this first international conference in India was devoted to medical writing, editing and publishing and open access initiative. As aptly stated by Nilima Kshirsagar, the Patron of the conference and the Dean of the twin institutions this was an effort on part of the journal to make its contribution in training prospective authors and editors and informing scientists in the field of biomedical research about challenges of information and using it correctly.

In his inaugural address, Vijaysinh Patankar, the city’s Additional Municipal Commissioner stated that it is noteworthy that the journal is showing constant improvement in its quality at a time when institution-run journals are finding it difficult to survive world over! A unique presentation from enthusiastic undergraduate students marked the beginning of the event. In this “by the students, for the students” session, which was open to everyone, they provided a student’s perspective regarding reading journals, understanding articles, undertaking research studies and even publishing research papers. It was amazing how students of early years in medical school could discuss a wide array of topics in a session lasting just over four hours that had the delegates glued to their chairs.

The main conference concentrated on three aspects: sessions on authors’ perspective and editors’ perspective, which were held over two days concurrently, and deliberations on open access, which was held on the last day of the conference. The keynote address on “Purpose of scientific writing” was delivered by SK Pandya, former Professor and Head of Neurosurgery at the same institutions. He lamented that the original concept of embarking on scientific writing for sharing ideas, provoking new thoughts and expanding understanding is being increasingly being relegated to the background. Advancement of career through publishing more papers is fast becoming the chief stimulant for medical writing. This has resulted in an explosion in the number of papers submitted for publication and actually getting published, a glut in the number of biomedical journals published and publication of trivial papers that are rarely read and almost never cited. He also bemoaned that technological advancement is aiding the phenomenon resulting in an unmanageable flood of “information”. He ended his talk by informing his audience that Ambrose Bierce has 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 hopefully would move away from this definition. In his talk on “Future of scientific publishing” RD Lele, former Dean and Professor and Head of Internal Medicine, Grant Medical College, Mumbai took up the issue of technological progress and its effect on publishing. He said that technological revolution was a double-edged weapon that on one hand empowers scientists with easy and almost instantaneous access to information; but also allows the less scrupulous ones to indulge in unethical practices such as plagiarism. The scientists will have to make the correct use of technology to ensure that the journals and printed word maintain their sanctity and credibility.

Today, the lay population and patients are hungry for information about health related issues. Delivering information and knowledge about health, disease, medicine, biomedical research and new discoveries is a challenge for medical authors. In a panel discussion chaired by the Dean, panelists emphasised that the message should be kept simple and language “de-jargonised” for ensuring effective communication with general public. They also welcomed the novel idea of having a section in the bio-medical journals for interaction with patients and layperson. They expressed concern over the way events and mishaps in the field of medical care and medical research are reported in the lay press. Conceding that it is the duty of lay press to inform its readers about these happenings, the panelists scoffed at the journalists’ habit of presenting a one-sided view and for dramatizing or exaggerating the issues. This, they felt, would be counter-productive in the long run in the form of loss of credibility for the newspaper, although it may reap a rich dividend in terms of increased circulation in the short-term. Such “sensationalisation” is always harmful for the community as several researchers would avoid doing worthwhile experiments and several practitioners would move away from communities that indulge in “trial by the media”.

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The editors’ perspective dealt with issues concerning authors’ training, authorship and ethical issues, resource generation, and improvement in editorial processes. Considering its importance, peer-review process was discussed at length. The process aims at filtering out inadequate or incorrect work and improves the accuracy and clarity of published work. It is true that the process is expensive, slow, prone to bias and ineffective in detecting frauds. In spite of these limitations and lacunae and despite lack of evidence about its consistent effectiveness, editors and journal managers should try and improve to make the peer-review system more efficient, effective and manageable. Innovations that could be considered include training reviewers, rewarding them for their contribution, rating their performance, providing checklists to ensure objectivity and ‘un-blinded’ review process for increasing accountability. The opportunity was also used to discuss certain issues pertaining to the Indian scenario. Most bio-medical journals from India are published without using the services of a professional publisher. This is contrary to the trend in other parts of the world. A debate between Deepraj Bhandarkar, editor of Journal of Minimal Access Surgery and Philip Abraham, Editor of the Indian Journal of Gastroenterology focussed on the pros and cons of enlisting the services of a professional publisher. Advantages of such an association include the reviewer assisting in the editorial processes, acting as a partner in improving the overall quality of the journal, providing guidance regarding indexation and enhancing journal visibility. The publisher could also provide assistance in website and manuscript management and support in resource generation. However, such a partnership is not without its flip side: the association with a publisher comes at a price, which most often is exorbitant. The debate ended with a view that publisher could help improve a journal if he is selected with great care and if there is 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 open access to information. Subbiah Arunachalam, from MSRF underlined the fundamental importance of access to information by pointing out that bright, dedicated and focussed individuals can do quality research in well-equipped laboratories, provided they have access to updated information and knowledge. Peer reviewed journals are the chief source of information for those indulging in biomedical research. However, soaring costs of journals and dwindling budgets of libraries are obstructing access to this vital source. Unless this phenomenon is arrested, it would affect the healthcare scenario in resource-poor countries earlier on, but even developed countries would be influenced adversely in future. Open access initiative is the way out. Students, staff, administrators, donor agencies and policy makers should come together and insist that findings of all publicly funded research should be available free on interoperable archives.

Stevan Harnad, University of Southampton, UK in his presentations showed that open access is beneficial to everyone: For the researcher, it helps increase its impact. More impact translates into more research projects coming to the institute and for the society, at large; it means more researchers getting stimulated in carrying out further studies on the research questions. He stated that there are two ways to achieve this, what he called the “golden route” and the “green route”. The golden route (open access publishing, OA-publishing) entails that publishers of all the 23000 bio-medical journals be convinced to subscribe to open access or to convince researchers of 2.5 million manuscripts published annually to submit their manuscripts only to journals that allow free access to full-text research articles. Although the number of journals embracing open access and the number of scientists espousing such journals is increasing, both these steps are fraught with difficulties and would take a long time. The “green route”, on the other hand refers open access archiving (OA-archive) with the researcher archiving his research paper (the version that has been peer-reviewed and accepted by the journal for publication) on his own website or on the university website and allow everyone to access these sites. The “green route” is far more effective, is more likely to succeed and can be implemented straight-away. It does not infringe upon the copyright, as well. Many publishers, by explicitly allowing the authors to self-archive research papers, are responding to the initiative in a positive way. Harnad with an activist’s zeal stated that resources should be put in establishing and maintaining university archives, making legislation and rules to ensure that findings of publicly funded research can be accessed by any scientist and to inform scientists about the importance of self-archiving. Like a seasoned campaigner for the “Open access initiative”, he made an impassioned appeal to everyone to act now. The universities, funding agencies and legislatures should mandate that results of research projects should be archived and should be available free of cost. The universities should encourage the culture of “publish with maximal impact” and should establish and maintain infrastructure for archiving. He also speculated that as 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!

Hooman Momen, Editor of the Bulletin of the World Health Organization and Pritpal Tamber, BioMed Central, UK discussed the impact of open access on the financial health of the journals and publishers. They pointed out that if readers were to receive free access to journal manuscripts online, other sources of income would have to be identified for the journals to survive and for publishers to maintain their profits. They suggested a number of new economic models in this regard: The journals could expect one or several of the following components to pay for the open access provided to readers: author, author’s institution, national research council, philanthropic organization or funding agency. Another novel idea would be to make readers to pay for other forms of articles (reviews, editorials, news, notes, discussion fora, etc.) available online, while allowing everyone to access full-text research articles for free. Some journals may choose to provide online free access to everyone only after a stipulated time period after publication. The paid print version and advertisements at the journal portal could be additional sources of revenue. The participants were
apprised of the efforts made by the WHO in safeguarding the interests of resource-poor countries. The WHO in collaboration with participating publishers provides free access to several journals to users in certain resource-poor countries through the HINARI and AGORA initiatives. Authors from these countries could also avail of concessions even when a journal routinely requests authors to pay. A special session provided an insight to the delegates regarding the efforts taken in this regard in India and other developing countries. These efforts include establishment of the IndMed and MedInd databases by the Indian MEDLARS centre that are in the process of providing free access to articles published in Indian bio-medical journals, efforts of Indian Institute of Science in establishing an institutional repository, the Latin American SciELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online) initiative wherein over 260 journals participate and the Health InterNetwork initiative that intends to strengthen public healthcare system in India by providing better access to high quality information, facilitating faster collection of data and deeper analysis and offering avenues that would facilitate easier consultation among decision makers.

### The Challenge and the support

This was the first of such events organized by the editorial board in the history of the journal. The preparations for the event began almost a year in advance. It was a mammoth task organizing an event, which was attended by over 400 delegates and faculty members, several of whom were from overseas. The conference was organized on a shoestring budget. It was organized in a medical college (avoiding a "five star" hotel) not only to save vital resources for the journal but also to provide the true environs of a teaching institution for serious scientific deliberations. This made it easier for the undergraduate and postgraduate students and college faculty members to attend various sessions. It was noteworthy that the Research Society of KEM Hospital, British Council, India and Indian governmental organizations such as the Medical Council of India, the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research and the Indian Council of Medical Research supported the conference with conference grants. From overseas, The Open Society Initiative and INASP (International Network for Access to Scientific publications) supported the conference in a big way. Over and above this several benevolent donors came forward to support the meeting in various ways. It is this commitment that would take the cause of medical writing and open access initiative a long way ahead.

### Unique Opportunity for JPGM

The conference provided a unique opportunity to the journal’s editorial board to learn about the issues and developments.

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<th>Initiative suggested during deliberations at the Conference</th>
<th>JPGM Policy and Implementation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Train authors to write better papers</td>
<td>The journal provides detailed instructions for submission of manuscripts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Better review process through training, rewards and checklists</td>
<td>Sessions on &quot;Authors’ perspective” in JPGM GoldCon: Informing and training authors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transparent review process</td>
<td>Reviewers’ performance being assessed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improve quality of published articles by thorough statistical reworking</td>
<td>Journal provides checklist to the reviewers and also a direct online link to articles on the subject</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transparent editorial process with redressal mechanism in place</td>
<td>Journal provides transparent review process with author able to track the review process of a submitted article and know about reviewers’ response</td>
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<td>Discourage unethical practices in research and publication</td>
<td>Blinded review process to minimize, if not eliminate, bias</td>
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<tr>
<td>Open Access: Make research (original) articles accessible online, free of charge</td>
<td>The journal insists on clearance from local/ institutional Ethics committees for research papers submitted for publication</td>
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in the field of editing and publishing. Several initiatives were discussed and proposed during the deliberations. It was heartening to note that several of these steps have already been initiated and implemented by JPGM (Table 1). The journal intends to continue its journey towards improving its performance and matching it with the best in the “business”. The journal would now proceed with digitalisation of its issues right from 1956, so that scientists can access articles published since the journal’s inception. The journal would also like to act as a catalyst for the installation of institutional archive at Seth GS Medical College and KEM Hospital that would archive the research work and publications emanating from the institution and that would be accessible to anyone and everyone around the globe. If all the attendees initiate similar steps in their own institutions and spheres, the conference would have well served its purpose.

The success of the conference

The delegates in their feedback congratulated the organizers for arranging a conference on a topic relevant to them. The audience participation made the proceedings lively and the interaction would benefit the scientists and editors who participated in the conference. There is no doubt that the conference has succeeded in informing and sensitising the delegates about various issues involved in medical writing, editing and publishing. We believe that the success of a conference of this nature is not assessed only on the basis of number of delegates attending the conference, or number of overseas faculty participating or number of research papers presented. It would also be measured on the basis of actions that scientists, authors and administrators take to ensure that the quality of papers published is improved, access to information is widened and is not decided on the basis of the scientist’s, institution’s or community’s ability to pay. Not at least when the information is expected to improve the health of individuals by protecting them from disease, disability and death. Thus, the conference would be judged as truly successful if it provides an impetus to the “open access initiative” and the organizers would feel gratified if the meet has succeeded in stimulating scientists and administrators of colleges and universities to act for the furthering the objectives of the Open Access Initiative.