

Regulatory Body For Pakistani Medical Journals: Ignoring Stakeholders Input

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Editors of medical journals in Pakistan recently came to know through electronic and print media that in future Pakistan Medical Commission, previously Pakistan Medical & Dental Council, will not be involved with the regulation and monitoring of periodicals.¹ In past Pakistan Medical & Dental Council (PM & DC) used to recognize medical journals after assessing their quality and regularity of publication. It was done through a committee of experts the members of which used to be the clinicians working in different medical colleges. They were mostly chosen without any set criteria and most were not well versed with the functioning of medical journals. They used to set criteria for acceptance or otherwise of medical journals and grant approval for certain period of time. This activity was quite irregular due to frequent changes in the working of PM & DC, legal issues and court cases. For many years the recognition process remained suspended and many journals lost their legal status. The criteria of accepting journals was not too strict and the purpose was to encourage a culture of research by encouraging clinicians, who in addition to rendering services to the patients, were also involved in teaching of medical students and residents. It was expected that level of research articles will not be high and at par with advanced countries as in most of the medical colleges and hospitals research facilities are not present.

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Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan, an institution involved with the monitoring of medical universities, is another regulatory body for medical journals. It has developed its own acceptance and categorizing criteria for medical across many disciplines including social sciences, arts, business, humanities, natural sciences and many others.² The focus of HEC is more on PhD programs which appears to be its main objective. The research in clinical sciences is usually based upon collection of patients' related data. Interventional studies are performed infrequently. Field studies usually fall under public health domain which is a different paradigm. However HEC has same criteria of categorizing journals though in each discipline comparison is made with same type of medical journals.

Recently HEC has introduced journal recognizing system the HJRS, in which categorization is done according to number of parameters.³ It is quite reasonable however in doing so the context, the Pakistan, is lacking.⁴ Even United Nations classify countries into different categories based upon their economical status. It will be unfair comparing Pakistani medical journals with those from developed world. Journals are at receiving end and can publish only those manuscripts which they receive. Usually submissions are made from within Pakistan from authors who are working in medical universities, which indirectly reflect the standard of HEC recognized educational program and institutions. Currently only three Pakistani clinical sciences medical journals are assigned JCR Impact Factor, are in X-category of HEC. There are no prospects at least in near future of any Pakistani medical journal to receive an impact factor. All three Pakistani medical journals that are mentioned above rely heavily upon quality manuscripts from foreign countries. As priority is given to those submissions, Pakistani authors are further at loss. They have no option except to send manuscript to Pakistani non impact factor journals as many quality international medical journals demand huge processing fee.

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HEC has recently started educating potential researchers as to how to conduct quality research and get it published as well as some facilitation is also done for the medical journals in terms of monetary support and training of editors. Pakistan Association of Medical Editors (PAME) is far more active in this regard. It holds frequent conferences, workshops and seminars for editors of medical journals as well as running certificate course in collaboration with University of Health Sciences Lahore.⁵ The first batch is already qualified and second batch is currently in first module.⁶

It is suggested that HEC rather than working alone, should collaborate with PAME which is an important stake holder in this context. The isolated decision of PMC of handing over monitoring of medical journals to HEC is not appreciated. HEC at present has no experience of running a medical journal of its own, it simply supports, which is not enough. HEC can do a lot as done in Iran and Turkey by practically getting involved in publishing of medical journals. By having dedicated department of Medical Journals at HEC level many processes can be facilitated like availability, running, trouble shooting of online journal management system (OJS) software, plagiarism check subscription like from iThenticate, availability of digital object identifier system (DOI), creation of XML files, creation of reviewers pool, partnership with international publishers for publication of medical journals from Pakistan etc. Many such models are available for which HEC can provide funding. We hope these suggestions from one of the important stake holder, the editors of medical journals, provide some direction to HEC officials for working in future.

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