

Publishing medical journals in resource-constrained settings: challenges and opportunities

Scientific publications play an important role in the scientific process by providing a key linkage between knowledge production and use.¹ Publication of medical research findings in medical journals, serve as a foundation for scientific validation and dissemination.² Hence, medical research must be published. Failure to publish or access important medical research findings would significantly affect the potential impact these findings will have on health and clinical practice.^{1,3}

Medical journals serve as vehicles for disseminating medical research through publications.^{1,3} This will advance medical knowledge and improve patient care and outcomes. Publishing these journals require a rigorous process of peer review, which is meant to ensure scientific integrity and validity for these researches.² Editors and reviewers act as gatekeepers and critics to scientific publications.^{1,2}

Publication of scientific journals generally and medical journals in particular, in resource-constrained settings as obtains in sub-Saharan Africa faces enormous challenges. These challenges have resulted in low research outputs from these resource-constrained settings.^{1,4} The challenges include poor funding, poor staffing, poor distribution, editorship and peer review problems, authorship problems, poor sustainability, poor succession planning, rising costs of publishing, donors disinterest in supporting journals, plagiarism issues, lack of readership feedback, poor infrastructure, poor journal visibility and indexing amongst others.¹⁻

⁴ Some of these will be further highlighted.

A major challenge is financial constraint. Poor funding will hinder journals from investing in the development of the editorial services of the journal and in hiring and training the editorial staff. The journals are thus unable to sustain themselves and will “die” or “go to sleep” not

long after they are founded.⁴ In order to remain afloat, the journals will be forced to charge high publication fees² which will be a significant burden to researchers in resource-constrained settings where poor remuneration is rife.

The peer review process is a rigorous one which requires dedicated editors and reviewers. Most editors are unpaid and volunteer their time and energy for the editorial work.^{1,3,4} Most reviewers are also not paid. With poverty in resource-constrained settings, the dedication required will be absent as the editors and reviewers will have to face their paying jobs for survival. Hence, there is a dearth of reviewers which tends to lengthen the editorial process. The editors and reviewers require training and re-training to function maximally.

Authorship problems are common. Most medical journals in sub-Saharan Africa have a slim author base and consequent poor patronage.³ Due to ‘impact factor fundamentalism’, some medical researchers in sub-Saharan Africa prefer to publish their research findings in journals overseas.³ The promotion-driven urge by authors to publish or perish, also lead to plagiarism issues and other author infractions such as duplicate publications, dual publications, salami slicing, data fabrication and gratuitous or gift authorship.¹

Journal visibility and indexing for medical journals in sub-Saharan Africa had been poor in Pubmed.¹ However, with options such as African Index Medicus and African Journals Online amongst others, this has improved.

The rising cost of publishing medical journals is a challenge. This has made some journals lag behind in their production.⁴ Timely and visible journal publication are essentials to attract author patronage. Where these are lacking, the journals soon go into extinction. The high cost of printing has made some journals to only publish online versions.

Despite these challenges, opportunities still exist for medical journals in resource-constrained settings. These will include transitioning to open access and online publishing, collaborating and partnering with institutions and organizations such as African Journal Partnership Program (AJPP), African Journals Online (AJOL) etc,^{1,3} journals pooling resources for copy editing and distributive services,¹ leveraging on available and affordable digital tools and platforms,^{1,4} sourcing for grants,¹ and encouraging training and development programmes for editors, reviewers and authors to improve them.^{1,3}

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