

Professional medical writing and ethical issues: a developing country's perspective

Behrooz Astaneh

Vice President, Iranian Medical Journal Editors Society, and Deputy Editor, Iranian Journal of Medical Sciences, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran; astanehb@yahoo.com

Sarah Masoumi

Editorial Assistant, Iranian Journal of Medical Sciences, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran

During the past few years, the number of research papers published by Iranian authors has increased dramatically.¹ This could be the result of the increase in the number of institutions, research centers, and universities, encouraging research productivity. Faculty members of such institutions need research papers for academic promotion.^{2,3}

To meet the increasing demand for science communication, many scientific journals have been established in Iran. The researchers' demand for promoting themselves academically through publications is a characteristic for all scientific fields, and medicine is not an exception. Currently more than 170 medical journals have been approved by the Iranian Commission for Medical Journals, which is affiliated to the Iranian Ministry of Health and Medical Education.

Although this research productivity in Iran is beneficial for the development and international recognition at individual and country levels, the quality of articles produced does not always meet the international standards, for various reasons.⁴ Moreover, with this ever increasing demand for publication, ethical misconduct such as plagiarism, data fabrication, and falsification might emerge.

Collective efforts, on behalf of students, researchers, and journals, are needed to overcome the problems that are faced by researchers and also journals in publishing high quality articles worthy of international recognition.⁵ One of these is the English language barrier, which can be frustrating. Some researchers are not proficient in academic English and are tempted to plagiarize. To overcome the language barrier and to prevent plagiarism and other ethical violations, two basic approaches seem necessary.

Firstly, academic training is the backbone of efforts. Researchers, editors, and reviewers need systematic training on specific topics. Stepwise workshops, along with an academic Master of Science course on medical journalism, have been running successfully in Shiraz University of Medical Sciences over the past three years. Such courses and systematic education may change the face of medical publishing in Iran during the next few years.

To tackle the short term obstacle of publishing research by Iranian medical researchers in a standard format, a faster approach seems necessary. Medical writing has been recognized as a profession for some years in Europe and North America. European and American associations of medical writers, EMWA and AMWA, were established by professional medical writers to regulate such activities. Medical writers are able to support researchers and to improve the performance of their scientific publications.

In a developing country like Iran, this profession has not yet been justified. Although some freelance writers help medical researchers with their academic tasks, the efforts

are mainly based on a trial and error approach and no unified guidelines or standards for their professional work are in place. Many of the currently freelance medical writers have had diverse editing experiences and are now following differing editing styles.

We believe that Iran's current potential in research productivity requires regulation of medical writing activities and keeping up with the international guidelines for medical journalism. It is crucial to encourage all those involved in medical publishing to adhere to ethical guidelines and guide researchers at all stages of their research accordingly. Freelance writers should be aware that they may not fulfill the standard criteria of authorship, and that putting their names in the byline of articles when they have merely provided professional support can be unethical. They should mediate and facilitate better understanding of research by efficient editing and following standard guidelines. They must propagate publication ethics, and their work should reflect such an idea.

Researchers can find it confusing and time consuming to organize their articles accurately in terms of content and language, or they may not be able to find suitable journals to publish in. Their articles may be rejected regardless of their creative content. Therefore, medical writing institutions can provide valuable advice to help researchers enhance the quality of their articles.⁶ This can be a stepping stone in creating professional medical writing guided by ethical standards in the country. It is hoped that with the active participation and contribution of all institutions, researchers, editors, and related organizations, high ethical standards, vital for the whole scientific enterprise, will be observed in the near future.

Competing interests BA works as a freelance medical writer in his free time.

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