

Editing around the World

Science editing in the developing world: a personal journey

Karim Vessal

Editor-in-Chief, *Iranian Journal of Radiology*; Life Member, Iranian Academy of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran; k_vessal@yahoo.com



As a science editor, I started my career in medical journalism 40 years ago, when I joined Shiraz University after specialization in radiology in Germany. I have been the founder or principal editor of three English language Iranian medical journals, namely *Iranian Journal of Medical Sciences* (formerly *Pahlavi*

Medical Journal), *Archives of Iranian Medicine*, and *Iranian Journal of Radiology*, all of which are now indexed by one or more of the leading online databases. I chose to publish in the current *lingua franca*, trying to prove that language is, in fact, a surmountable hurdle.¹ Other hurdles were poor infrastructure and inadequate funding to drive the rusted wheels of scientific research and, as a corollary, meager output.

At the early stages, it was imperative to stimulate potential authors to write, to propagate this attitude to others, and, at the same time, to maintain a sufficient number of expert reviewers who would be able to evaluate submissions and function as partners, helping to promote the quality of publications.

With limited assistance, to maintain a set of publishing standards, I had to coordinate communication between authors and reviewers, experts in various fields of medical sciences. Before the digital era, it often required long hours of plunging into Index Medicus in hard copy, the only available source of reference in this part of the world.

The main impetus for my interest in medical science editing stemmed from my undergraduate years as well as specialty training in Europe. While reading textbooks I used to pay attention to authors' names in the reference lists at the end of chapters. This stood at variance with what I had learned about the history of Iran in my high-school years in relation to the abundance of scholars and the erudition of the country. It dawned on me how the flow of science had reversed over the past centuries in the Middle East and that the "lux" was no more "ex oriente".

The major source of discouragement for our activity stemmed, unfortunately, from our own faculty members, who were constantly comparing our journal to the high-ranking world journals and questioning the value of any efforts put into the indigenous product. They considered that all the endeavours we made were futile efforts, and that trying to publish materials from this part of the world was worthless and not of the quality of those published by

westerners. They claimed that little could be added to what the developed world published in its journals.

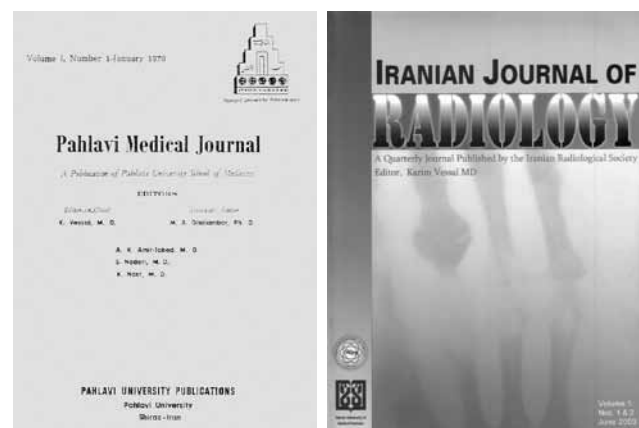
My main efforts were directed at publishing original articles and case reports that were deemed to incorporate some addition to the world's knowledge. Though review articles would come to be important, we did not have access to experts in writing such articles and did not publish reviews. Instead, we emphasized original articles examining disease conditions prevalent in the region.²

There was also an incentive to run a journal as an element of patriotism, similar to the efforts made by nearly all countries to have their national flags raised in the international arena of sports competition.

My message was that promoting scientific research and writing was the only way out of the existing situation. However, far from mainstream research, I had to focus primarily on the description and analysis of endemic diseases which would be attractive to western readers and to the leading indexing organizations. Fortunately, I have been witnessing a steady growth in scientific publications over the past decades, which is certainly encouraging, if not ideal.

References

- Vessal K, Habibzadeh F. Rules of the game of scientific writing: fair play and plagiarism. *Lancet* 2007;369(9562):641. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(07)60307-9
- Habibzadeh F. Does the world need a new journal? *International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 2010;1(1):ii. <http://www.theijoem.com/ijoem/index.php/ijoem/article/view/2/17> (accessed 29 May 2011).



Front pages of the inaugural issues of *Pahlavi Medical Journal* and *Iranian Journal of Radiology*, founded by Karim Vessal