

Permit No MITA (P) 111/09/2002
ISSN 0037 - 5675

JOURNAL OF THE SINGAPORE
MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

Editor
A/Prof C Rajasoorya

Deputy Editor
Prof Wilfred C G Peh

International Corresponding Editors
Prof Azrul Azwar (Indonesia)
Prof Linda Clever (USA)
Prof Myo Myint (Myanmar)
Prof Neil Pride (UK)
Prof Tan Chong Tin (Malaysia)
Prof Teh Bin Tean (USA)
Prof Victor Yu (Australia)

Editorial Board
Dr Chan Yiong Huak
Dr Chin Jing Jih
Dr Chow Wan Cheng
Dr Chuah Khoon Leong
A/Prof Ho Nai Kiong
Prof Kua Ee Heok
Dr Eugene Liu Hern Choon
Dr Kenneth Lyen
Dr Denis Nyam
A/Prof Paul Ananth Tambyah
A/Prof Luke Tan Kim Siang
Dr Kelvin Tan Kok Hian
Dr Jackie Tan Yu Ling

Ex-Officio
Dr Lee Pheng Soon
Dr Tham Tat Yean

Editorial Manager
Chua Gek Eng

Assistant Editorial Manager
Dr Tham Wai Fong Eileen

Editorial Address
A/Prof C Rajasoorya, Editor
Singapore Medical Journal
Singapore Medical Association
2 College Road
Singapore 169850



Cover Picture:
Missed abortion. Sagittal transvaginal US image shows a hyperechoic mass within the lower end of the uterus that enters the endocervical canal. There is no evidence of increased hyperechoic trophoblastic tissue around the walls of the endocervical canal.
(Refer to page 602-606)

Snapshots of Editing a Medical Journal

C Rajasoorya

A **Medical Journal** holds together an academic community that shares common interest. Both owners and editors want their journals to succeed, although they have different roles. Editors are primarily responsible to inform and educate readers, with attention to the accuracy and importance of journal articles, and to protect and strengthen the integrity and quality of the journal and its processes. Owners are ultimately responsible for all aspects of publishing the journal, including its staff, budget, and business policies. The occasional conflict of interest is best aligned on the principle of mutual respect and trust, and recognition of each other's authority and responsibility. Conflicts can damage the intellectual integrity and reputation of the journal and its financial success.

Publication in journals offers a tremendous prospect to share and communicate new ideas and knowledge. These allow individual(s) to put across thoughts, in a concise and structured format that allows a wider readership to be aware of work done. Additionally, publication would imply that the investigators are prepared to showcase to their peers, as well as undergo scrutiny, criticisms and an occasional hurled insult on their work. Publication in medicine continues to feature as a key component of academic excellence. These, particularly in high impact-factor journals have been reflected as performance indicators for both individuals and institutions. The impact factor was originally devised as an index of the quality of scientific journals – however its derivation and its mythical and sometimes inappropriate emphasis have been questioned⁽¹⁾. **Peer-review process** requirements of most journals have, at least for the moment, ensured the continued existence of journals despite the technological revolution. With an increasing move towards online/internet journals and its accessibility, some have opted to do away with peer review⁽²⁾.

New research findings are often punctuated by words like “interesting, suggestive, plausible, and persuasive”⁽³⁾. As much as most authors attempt to answer hypothetical questions in their publications, the conclusions and accompanying editorials often recommend larger trials with similar but refined or modified methodology and raise further questions to answers. By the simple nature of fact that ideas are continually being reshaped, journals should never be considered repositories of absolute truth⁽⁴⁾. Using three important publications within the same issue of the prestigious publication *Nature*, Tobin⁽⁵⁾ provides some **suggestions to researchers** on communication of research work: collaborating with faculty colleagues is more profitable than competing against them, and research is of no value if unpublished and the truly important is better communicated in a whisper rather than a shout. Editors and experienced authors will often realise the **recipe to inviting rejection** has components that include an inappropriate journal, a dull topic with lots of previous research, lack of context for

Department of
Medicine
Alexandra Hospital
378 Alexandra Road
Singapore 159964

C Rajasoorya, FAMS,
FRCP (Edin), FACE
Senior Consultant and
Endocrinologist

Correspondence to:
C Rajasoorya
Tel: (65) 6379 3778
Fax: (65) 6379 3893
Email: Rajasoorya_C
@alexhosp.com.sg

research, insignificant number of subjects, poor readability, sloppiness in manuscript and unjustified conclusions.

Authorship has been a long contentious issue – of particular concern has been the number of authors, the order and the criterion for their inclusion or exclusion. Authors are members of the team who contribute intellectually to the project and participate in the writing of manuscript as well as review, approve and take responsibility for its contents. Unfortunately the pressure to “publish or perish” has been punctuated by the increasing emergence of fabrication, falsification, plagiarism⁽⁶⁾, duplicate publication and a new category of authors that have been sub-categorised as “Ghost authors”, “Gift authors”, “Free Loaders” or “Honorary” authors.

The **requirements and standards** of journals differ widely. The formation of the Vancouver group in 1978 where a group of editors from some major biomedical journals met in British Columbia was a crucial step on obtaining consensus on uniform technical requirements for manuscripts submissions. This Vancouver group subsequently evolved into the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Editors are now subjected to tremendous scrutiny, particularly where regulatory, professional and educational bodies are beginning to recognise the need to tackle **misconduct in biomedical research**. A draft code has been recently proposed at a meeting held in London in October 2003 in the annual seminar on the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). This code⁽⁷⁾ takes into consideration the need for editors to manage conflicts of interests, ensure accuracy of published material, have a proper peer review process, a publication of an apology whenever appropriate, having a mechanism for retraction of articles that are fraudulent, ensuring that ethical principles and patient confidentiality are preserved, taking action against misconduct of authors or even editorial board members and ensuring editorial independence. It even proposes a punitive action against editors who do not live by that code.

While on one hand, editors must be critical of the authors and their work they must be careful not to ignore the inherent problems and bias associated with the peer review process itself. Editors can face repeated pressure to publish articles/reviews by those who neither have the justification nor the academic authority. Editors will always face the burdensome task of appeals and counter appeals to publish articles that have been peer reviewed and rejected. Manuscripts can and have either been lost or held up in long delays by a minority of reviewers – the editor has to ensure these are kept to the bare minimum. Authors will continue to attempt to submit/resubmit articles with complete ignorance of comments from the editor and/or reviewers or with total ignorance of instructions to authors. Interestingly, some authors may continue to address manuscripts to previous editors long after the changes had been effected at the editorial board!

Over the last few years numerous **changes** have been gradually introduced to the Singapore Medical Journal (SMJ) – one of the first changes made was to “split” the SMA News and SMJ into separate publications. Newer editorial board members were amalgamated into the team, firstly as part of a self renewal process and secondly to introduce special expertise based on journal submissions and requirements. With this move, currently all articles in the SMJ with major respective components of bio-statistics, pathology and radiology are reviewed independently and additionally by the respective editorial board


While on one hand, editors must be critical of the authors and their work they must be careful not to ignore the inherent problems and bias associated with the peer review process itself.

The journal has continued to see increasing success in attracting submissions from both the regional and international arena.

members. The Editorial content and topic had been modified to be a topical and authoritative commentary based on an article within the journal. Editorials have been written by a spread of sub-specialists from the private and public sector with both clusters and different institutions well represented. Editorials were not necessarily confined to only medically trained individuals. All articles of the SMJ are now currently available on Portable Document Format (pdf) online and free of charge. New features like "Medicine in Stamps" and "Basic Statistics for Doctors" were introduced as regular features to supplement the popular "Clinics in Diagnostic Imaging". The "Stamps in Medicine" series are unique to medical journals in that it is the only regular feature where colour reproductions of stamps are published in the English literature. Since 2001, a fast track publication route has been introduced to expedite timely publication of articles of outstanding quality and of imminent interest to clinicians. This route helped the journal publish one of the earliest reports as well as an accompanying editorial on the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), where the article was reviewed and accepted for publication within a week. The journal has continued to see increasing success in attracting submissions from both the regional and international arena. Shorter wait time from acceptance to publication was achieved through a multi-pronged strategy of increasing pages in the journal, a more liberal policy with regard to rejection of uninvited reviews and a stricter policy on publication of case reports that were original and non-duplicate. Reviewers have thus been prompted to pay specific attention to see if there is anything new in case-reports that are worthy of publication. A readership survey was conducted in 2002 to assess the needs of the majority (of respondents) as well as to continue to remain a journal that is responsive to the needs of the authors, reviewers and readers. A best original paper award for the year 2003 is currently under selection by a team independent of the editorial board. The editorial team has also reviewed and refined the processes and put into place safeguards in the production of journal supplements. Journal reviewers will be shortly receiving a new format for the peer review process forms that help them simplify their feedback in a way that would be easier for authors too.

Despite minor hiccups, four years at the helm of the editorial board of the SMJ has been an enriching and exhilarating (at times) experience that encompasses all aspects of professional life – academia, ethics, professionalism, etiquette, pressures (be it blatant or subtle) and certainly the inevitable politics in medicine. Given the onerous task of taking over the editorship the perilousness of inadvertently destroying the good track record of my distinguished predecessors was the foremost fear on my mind. Nonetheless, the flagship publication of the Singapore Medical Association has hopefully been maintained and enhanced. These have been achieved due to the efforts of my very able and reliable editorial board. The Editor and his journal only represent the summation of the functional cohesion of the entire team involved in the production of the journal. In this regard, I am deeply indebted to my team at the editorial board as well as the editorial managers for giving me all the untiring support and time. The trust, confidence and editorial independence given by the council members had added to the richness and joy of leading a local journal's editorial board. The journal publishers have also aided tremendously in responding to our needs and last minute addition and changes. I have been most fortunate

to have the assistance of a whole host of reviewers of manuscripts to whom I am indebted for helping me in the strive towards quality and standards.

The future augurs well for the SMJ. A very enthusiastic and experienced editor takes over with his own team of editorial board members from January 2004 – the journal will, no doubt, move to greater heights and progress towards being one of the leading arms of academic excellence in Singapore and showpiece to the regional and international audience. I seek your continued support for the SMJ and the new team. 

REFERENCES

1. Rogers LF. Impact Factor: myths and realities. *Ann Acad Med Singapore* 2003; 32:429-32.
2. Spier R. The history of the peer-review process. *Trends Biotechnol* 2002 Aug; 20(8):357-8.
3. Wilson EO. *Consilience: the unity of knowledge*. New York: Vintage Books; 1999.
4. Tobin MJ. The role of a journal in scientific controversy. *Am J Respir Crit Care Med* 2003; 168:511-4.
5. Tobin MJ. Three papers, three lessons. *Am J Respir Crit Care Med* 2003; 17:1047-9.
6. Martyn C. Editorial. Fabrication, falsification and plagiarism. *Q J Med* 2003; 96:243-4.
7. Smith R. Draft code of conduct for medical editors. *BMJ* [serial online] 2003; 327:1010 (1 November). Available at www.bmj.com. Accessed Dec 8, 2003.

Publisher

Singapore Medical Journal
Level 2, Alumni Medical Centre
2 College Road
Singapore 169850
Tel: 6223 1264
Fax: 6224 7827
URL <http://www.sma.org.sg>

Design and Advertising

Equity Communications Pte Ltd
69 Spottiswoode Park Road
Singapore 088658
Tel: 6324 4337
Fax: 6324 4661
Email: enquiries@equity.com.sg

For advertising placement,
call or email

• Charlie Teo at
Tel: 6324 4337
Email: charlieteo@equity.com.sg

Printed by Entraco Printing Pte Ltd

The Singapore Medical Journal is published monthly by the Singapore Medical Association. All articles published, including editorials, letters and book reviews represent the opinion of the authors and do not reflect the official policy of the SMA or Institution with which the authors are affiliated unless this is clearly specified. The Publisher cannot accept responsibility for the correctness or accuracy of the advertisers' text and/or claim or any opinion expressed. The appearance of advertisements in the Journal does not necessarily constitute an approval or endorsement by the SMA of the product or service advertised.

Articles published in the Singapore Medical Journal are protected by copyright. No material in this journal may be reproduced photographically or stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, etc. without the prior written permission of the publisher. The contents of this publication are not to be quoted in the press without permission of the Editor.