

OBSTACLES TO PUBLISHING AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT THEM

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"The ink of the scholar is more precious than the blood of martyrs"

THE HOLY PROPHET (PBUH)

Psychiatrists in academia are required, like all other professionals, to contribute to the existing scientific literature in their field. In addition to ongoing teaching (both undergraduate and post-graduate) and patient service responsibilities, writing and publishing high quality research articles is a required aspect of an academic career. Frequent, high quality publications are necessary to sustain and advance one's academic career. While this approach has been criticized for a number of reasons (e.g. that the pressure to publish scholarly articles detracts from undergraduate or post graduate teaching), research publications remain a core benchmark to measure academic performance in teaching positions.^{1,2}

In this paper, we review the challenges facing young faculty members in Pakistan regarding this important issue. We point out the obstacles to creating, writing and publishing high quality research papers and suggest some rational solutions within the existing medical system of Pakistan.

THE PROBLEM

Young teaching faculty (either newly hired after a recent post-graduate degree or those switching to an academic career after some years in practice in Pakistan or abroad) often face a daunting obstacle: the requirement to publish frequently and voluminously in order to advance their career and/or obtain tenure (permanent teaching positions).

While the requirements differ amongst various teaching settings (public vs. private institutions, provincial vs. federal agencies etc), a young faculty member's research and publication output remains an important benchmark for administrators and departmental and institutional leaders.

In Pakistan, as in other parts of the world, young faculty face a variety of challenges in accomplishing the goal of becoming well published researchers. These include, but are not limited to, lack of knowledgeable and available research mentors, managing a 'dual career' i.e. teaching in the morning and seeing patients in the afternoons or evenings leaving little time or energy for reading and research, the lack of availability of appropriate 'environments' in their teaching departments (e.g. no emphasis on research at departmental level, no collaborations with other research oriented institutions etc) and perhaps most importantly, no formal skill or training in creative writing skills. In addition, there is often little or no opportunity in most academic Psychiatry departments in Pakistan to collaborate with senior research faculty in institutions other than their own.

Additional hindrances in public sector medical institutions include lack of access to scientific databases, lack of basic IT/Computer facilities including uninterrupted access to the internet, lack of protected time available for research and lack of research mentors who are well published authors.

There is an overall lack of emphasis on research and publication with a recent article pointing out that Pakistan lags behind most countries in the region with a very low ratio of medical research productivity: only 8 publications/million population with more than half of this output coming from just two institutions³

If a junior faculty member somehow manages to overcome these obstacles, they are then faced with the question of where to publish. Even within Pakistan, there are dozens of journals, some general and some specialty specific, some institutional and others autonomous, making it difficult to decide what the appropriate venue is for one's research and writing efforts. In addition, in spite of the growing and welcome atmosphere of honesty and transparency in academic circles, the fact remains that it is not just 'what' one knows but 'who' one knows which can often determine if a research publication will see the light of day. Contacts with senior academicians and well published authors, many of whom are on the editorial boards of research journals are essential to ensure that a research paper gets a fair look. Junior faculty, especially those who have trained outside Pakistan often do not have this advantage.

It is an unfortunate fact that medical school curricula do not emphasize familiarity with research methodology⁴. Except for some brief exposure to research during one's basic science classes, it is unlikely that a medical student will learn much (or anything) about research before they graduate.

Post-Graduate training in Pakistan does include a research component. Fellows of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Pakistan are expected to have completed a research dissertation during their training. Similarly, Universities and colleges offering post graduate MD/MS degrees are also increasingly requiring the completion of a high quality research project as part of the training. However, for a variety of reason, this research experience is unlikely to prepare trainees for an academic career⁵

Post-graduate training in the USA and UK offers optional research training for senior post graduate residents in the area of their choice and fellowships in clinical or basic research following completion of post graduate medical training. In the USA at least, the majority of doctors from Pakistan do not choose research careers, preferring the comfort and relatively higher income of a salaried position or private practice.

Thus, most junior faculty hired as lecturers, demonstrators or Assistant Professors do not have much experience or knowledge of research.

WHERE CAN YOU BEGIN?

The old adage 'you learn something by doing it' holds true for research as well. The easiest way to start in research is to find a topic you are interested in and write something about it.

In order of ascending level of difficulty (and stronger evidence base), here is an easy to follow guide to research studies:

- Commentaries, opinion pieces: These are simply your thoughts about any subject that you find interesting. If you can add some references for what you are writing, so much the better. If well written, these can be published in prestigious journals
- Case Reports: If you see an interesting and/or unusual case, write it up! It does not need to be a rare or once in a life time patient. Even the most common illnesses can be written up in interesting ways.
- Case Series: If you can collect a few similar cases of an illness, you can write it up as a case series.
- Observational or Cross Sectional Studies: These are also easy to design and implement but for someone completely unfamiliar with research, some assistance will be needed from other faculty or a dedicated research assistant.
- Research beyond this level includes case control studies, cohort studies, randomized control trials, and systematic reviews/meta-analysis which usually require a well equipped and well staffed research department with specialized staff.
- Literature reviews are another relatively easy option for those unfamiliar with research although the parameters of the search/review need to be well defined to avoid mistakes and exclusions.

BASIC ENGLISH AND WRITING SKILLS

Pakistan's undergraduate medical curriculum is taught in English but the fact remains that most medical graduates in Pakistan have only a tenuous knowledge of spoken English and their command over written English is even weaker. Writing and publishing research requires at least a basic familiarity with English writing. There have been cases where a submitted research paper has been rejected or sent for revision solely on the basis of unintelligible English. The best research is useless unless communicated properly. Most journals in the US and UK are now offering affiliated English editing services for a fee since most journal editors do not have the time or inclination to correct a submitted paper's language⁶.

If your English writing skills are weak, consider taking a remedial course in person or on-line. As mentioned above, the only way to learn to write good English is to do it. Practice is the key. Write, re-

write, have someone read/critique it, then re-write again. Your skills will improve slowly but surely over time.

WHICH JOURNAL SHOULD YOU SUBMIT YOUR PAPER TO?

Logically, you should begin by submitting your first one or two papers to the journal of your mother institution or your professional association (if available). The advantage of a local journal is that you may already know, or know of, the people running the journal (through professional meetings, conferences, lectures, seminars etc) making it easier to follow up. The next step up would be an institutional journal outside your home city. This requires your paper to be well researched and well written in order to pass the Chief Editor's 'first look'. If the Editor likes the paper, only then will it be sent for external peer-review, the next step in the process.

Junior faculty trained abroad, who may already have mentors or contacts in the country in which they trained, can send their initial publications to those countries through their mentors or colleagues. Papers sent to journals especially those in technically advanced countries (USA, UK, Canada, Japan etc) where you have no contacts run the risk of being summarily rejected, usually because each journal has a specific niche and specific policies about what kind of research articles they will entertain based on their editorial policies.

It is usually not advisable for junior faculty trained in Pakistan to send their papers to foreign journals unless invited to do so or unless they can find a research collaborator or colleague abroad who can assist.

JOURNAL RECOGNITION AND RANKINGS

There are thousands of journals currently published all over the world. Even within Pakistan, dozens of medical journals are published each year. Before you submit your paper, assess the quality and ranking of a journal to ensure the best impact for your work.

Any journal you submit to must be recognized by the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC) and/or the Higher Education Commission (HEC). Check the journal's standing with the PMDC before you submit your work⁷

Papers published in PMDC recognized journals are eligible to be counted for promotions for faculty serving in the Basic Pay Scale (BPS) system as well as for recognition of previous teaching/academic experience.

HEC uses a more rigorous system of 'ranking' journals according to their scientific and editorial content. In addition to recognizing/ listing journals, HEC also ranks journals into categories with journals having an 'Impact Factor' ranked at the top. 'Impact Factor' (IF) is an international measure of a journal's relative importance within its field⁸. It reflects the average number of citations to recent articles published in the journal. HEC ranks non-impact factor journals lower in its listing. HEC has also established its own rules for matching journal publications to academic appointments/promotions⁹.

HEC started its 'Tenure Track' faculty recruitment system close to ten years ago. This system is now being steadily implemented in medical institutions (in addition to other disciplines like Agriculture, Engineering, Law etc) and is serving as a healthy antidote to the traditional BPS/Public Service Commission system. The 'Tenure Track' faculty hiring system is 'performance-based' with significant built-in incentives for excellence in research and teaching. HEC envisions this

system as eventually replacing the old BPS system although that transition may be some years away. However, for junior faculty just starting their careers, it is a good idea to at least study the publication requirements of the TTS system to motivate themselves.

TAKE HOME MESSAGE:

- As soon as you are hired as an academic faculty member, start writing. Write about anything that interests you and get your senior colleagues to read and critique it. Keep writing.
- Learn basic research by reading books and online. Many US universities offer free research courses online.
- Start reading the research literature and learn to use scientific search engines (Google Scholar, PubMed). Organize and lead journal clubs for medical students, house officers and post graduate residents.
- Attend medical conferences to network with research colleagues. If your own institution has a research journal, apply to its editorial board. Editors are always looking for help and it will make your own submissions easier.
- Start with Commentaries and Case Reports and work your way up.
- Don't be discouraged if your first few submissions are summarily rejected. Remember what the famous American inventor Thomas Edison said "Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration".

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