Why Articles Get Rejected at JCPSP: Myths and Realities

Jamshed Akhtar

The Journal of College of Physicians and Surgeons Pakistan (JCPSP) is a premier monthly periodical. On each day, JCPSP receives a number of manuscripts for publication. Most of them are submitted as original articles. The ‘original article’ terminology is quite interesting. How we at JCPSP entertain this term is entirely different from how Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC) describes it. The confusion among Pakistani authors arises out of this nomenclature. Every article, irrespective of its format, is an original endeavour in a strict sense, as the authors have collected data in their clinical and research setting and reported the results. However, for rating according to the quality of research, a hierarchy system is agreed upon internationally. According to this, the highest grade is given to systematic reviews and meta-analyses of randomized controlled trials followed by randomized controlled trials, non-randomized interventional studies, observational studies, non-experimental studies and lastly expert opinion as reported in BMJ (Figure 1).

The most reputable journals like New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) with Impact Factor (IF) of 29.0 as that of 2001, JAMA (IF – 17.6), Lancet (IF – 13.3), BMJ (IF – 6.6) and CAMJ (IF – 2.8) are the ones that receive most of high quality research articles. These journals on the other hand have a high rejection rate of manuscripts submitted to them. NEJM has a rejection rate of more than 90%, while CMAJ has over 85% rejection rate. The high rejection rate does not deter authors from submitting to these prestigious journals. Moreover, articles after getting accepted have very long waiting time for publication, although Lancet publishes online much earlier than other journals. Unfortunately none of the Pakistani medical journals have an Impact Factor (IF represents number of citations each journal article receives in the first 1-2 years after publication). The goal of JCPSP in this regard is to gain such a distinction at the earliest. This is possible only when it receives high quality research articles that could be cited by others, a pre-requisite to be assessed for impact factor calculation. The impact factor has also raised many questions but at present it is considered to be a yardstick for rating periodicals.

JCPSP is one of the three journals from Pakistan that are indexed with MEDLINE, one of the largest internationally recognized data-base related to medical and allied fields. The position that JCPSP enjoys is unique. CPSP is a well-reputed institute, both nationally and internationally, that promotes medical education. The Fellowship awarded by CPSP is well recognized all over the world and many of its Fellows are working overseas in various faculty positions. During the residency program, CPSP conducts mandatory workshops on research methodology, biostatistics, dissertation writing and for learning skills at using computers and internets. The objective behind all this is to introduce the concept of research to trainees who usually do not have such experience at undergraduate level. CPSP also helps trainees by facilitating them as how to write synopsis for the research project, which they carry out during residency years. The supervisors, who have key role to play during the training of residents, have to attend similar workshops. JCPSP provides a portal through which they can publish their scientific work. JCPSP, now in the 18th year of publication, is a highly reputed journal, with author-friendly approach. It provides facilitation to contributors at all levels. It has a strong in-house editing / publishing system with a large pool of reviewers from Pakistan and abroad. The in-house editors reject most of the articles and less number of articles are rejected by the reviewers. This may seem strange but the fact of the matter is that authors hardly read guidelines for submission of articles in JCPSP. The second reason of rejection is poor selection of subject and the study design. Most of the articles address subjects that are well studied and reported in literature. They fall into the category of redundant publication and are strongly discouraged. Most of such studies are either retrospective or prospective descriptive data with no novelty. Some are not even updated especially the ones that are previously presented in some scientific meetings or based upon dissertation of trainees.

JCPSP receives very few randomized controlled trials. These too are full of flaws in terms of subject selection, randomization, blinding, statistical evaluation and critical analysis. They do not even carry approval certificate from the Research and Ethical Committee of the institute, where the research was conducted. While some may argue that we are deficient in our own clinical data and writing and research culture does not exist.

Correspondence: Dr. Jamshed Akhtar, Editor, JCPSP Department of Paediatric Surgery, National Institute of Child Health, Rafiquee Shaheed Road, Karachi-75510. E-mail: jamjim88@yahoo.com

Received September 22, 2008; accepted September 24, 2008.
Such argument does not hold true when so many public and private sector medical universities have now existed for nearly a decade. Secondly, JCPSP has an international readers’ population and can not afford presenting a weak data to them. We look forward to some concrete input from our contributors in this regard. The editorial staff at JCPSP is always ready to provide help in improving the quality of manuscript. The present rejection rate at JCPSP is about 20%, which is not different from other MEDLINE indexed Pakistani journals, however, it is far behind international standards.

Higher Education Commission of Pakistan has made it mandatory for the future promotions and appointments to be linked to publication of articles in impact factor journals. The authors from Pakistan usually contribute to scientific journals because of this being mandatory for their promotions. The requirements laid down by Pakistan Medical and Dental Council, although in good faith, are considered as a forceful binding. PMDC in itself has provided very vague definition of original article, to be given credit for promotion, thus everybody wants original article to his/her credit. This has taken contributors into a blind alley. At JCPSP, we encourage authors to contribute to world literature in any form like clinical practice articles, debates, current issues, current practices, images, evidence-based reports, Knowledge, Attitude and Practices (KAP) study, survey report, audit report, case reports, short communications, short articles, reviews, letters to the editor, dissertation-based article etc. This is done to promote various categories of scientific contributions from practicing physicians. A change in category is suggested to authors when they submit a manuscript so-called as ‘original article’, which is found deficient in quality and does not merit publication in that category. This policy annoys most of the authors but they must understand the philosophy behind it.

Another important issue is that of authorship credit. This point was recently highlighted in a letter written to a newspaper. A diverse authorship is found in most of the articles. The contributors do not belong to same specialty, institute and even cities. This professional misconduct is not tolerated at JCPSP. In future, we have planned to lay down the policy of submission of written statement of contribution of each author to the article. They have to disclose conflict of interest as well.

References part is another weak area of the manuscript. It is not the number of references but the number of full length articles that authors have read and then critically analyzed before being cited. At present, authors quote 6-10 references with one statement just to fulfill the obligation. In future, the editorial board may ask authors to submit either soft or hard copy of all full length articles that they have cited in their article.

In the end, we would like to quote from Drummond and Reeves (2005) that “we encourage authors of short papers to consider submitting to the correspondence section. We are aware that some authors worry that correspondence may have less impact than a full paper, but would like to remind authors that it is the perceived quality and importance of the findings that determines the number of citations an article receives, not its length; some of the most highly cited JAC articles have appeared in the correspondence section.”

We hope this information will clear the misconceptions related to the working of editorial board of JCPSP. It is expected that authors whose articles get rejected will not be discouraged and their future submission to JCPSP would be based upon guidelines presented in this article. It will help authors in planning and conducting the research and more importantly how to document results so that the article does not get rejected.

References

1. http://bmj.bmjjournals.com/cgi/content/full/323/7308/334 accessed on September 21, 2008
2. www.cmaj.ca/misc/slides/writing.ppt accessed on September 21, 2008