Editorial

POINTS TO PONDER FOR WRITING AN ARTICLE

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KEY WORD : Medical writing.

A research or clinical case report series is complete only when it has been read, discussed, repeated by others and either confirmed or rejected. Medical curricula are very comprehensive but do not teach the art and science of writing an article. The rejection can be very disheartening more so when quality of basic work is good. Author would rather blame the editors than poor construction and incomprehensible logic for rejection. An attempt is made here to help the prospective authors who may also like to refer to monographs on the subject [1-4].

Major thrust area in MJAFI is 'original articles'. Its basic format is IMRAD : introduction, methods, results and discussion. The article should start with a question (hypothesis) and through logical sequence of arguments should arrive at an answer (new hypothesis). The readers must find something new, true and of importance in comprehensible form in the article

Introduction should have brief explanation of 'why did you start'. It is culled from literature briefly highlighting the deficiencies and mentioning the gaps that may be filled by your work. Or the present study could be furtherance of earlier short or long term studies in a controlled fashion. But many authors would make do with resume of literature unrelated to the study in question, forgetting to mention 'why' of their study. Others would go about in a long tortuous arguments and then tell 'why'.

Material and methods should be precise

providing either the details of methodology or citing references in a manner that readers are able to repeat the experiment if they so desire. A long detailed methodology is really unnecessary as discerning reader can collect the same from the cited references. However it is important to give details of any modifications made by you in the established methods.

Results say 'what did you find'. But it should be restricted to the query or hypothesis raised in the Introduction. Tables can carry lot of data. Text is used for descriptive data, short numerical results and comparisons made by picking out important data from larger tables and diagrams. Graphs and scatter diagrams describe comparisons and relationships. Application of statistical significance and other methods is a problem to many medical workers more so clinicians who are generally short of time, patience or may be knowledge. But it is a must. It is surprising but some can inter-twine Material & Methods and Results when two are clearly separable.

Discussion finally must convey 'what all this means'. Main findings are recapitulated and discussed with those in literature either conflicting or confirming with your findings. Argue your case in light of these observations and eventually arrive at clinical or research implications. Recommendations can then be suggested.

Abstract is generally not given the time and effort it deserves. It is precis of the article inclusive of all the four parts mentioned

above. It should state the purpose of the study, basic methodology, main findings (specific data and statistical significance) and principal conclusions in not more than 200 words.

Second major component of MJAFI is case reports. These are Rolls Royce of Medical writing - every one wants to ride these. As it happens, these are more difficult to write than the original articles. One must understand the purpose of publication of a case report. These are augmentations to the text book pictures on account of their rarity (first case in the literature or in a particular region), different presentations from earlier cases, use of different and new methods of investigations, diagnosis, treatment or surgical techniques. Introduction of a case report should introduce the disease giving reasons for reporting and discussion should highlight unusual features of the case.

Authorships and their sequence is a highly controversial field. However, Vancouver group of editors agreed on the key concept of intellectual responsibility. Only those persons should lend their names for authorship who have made substantial intellectual contribution to a study or article. It is for this reason that majority of journals including MJAFI insist on intellectual contribution and responsibility certificates from each of the authors. Sequence of authorship should be in decreasing order of contribution. It is but reasonable that the postgraduate and not the guide be the first author for the article based on dissertation. It is good practice to include pathologists, radiologists and others as authors if they have contributed substantially to the study or the diagnosis of the case.

There is nothing wrong in Head of the Department being the last author of articles originating from his department. This is regarded as authentication of the study by the HOD. However the practice should be restricted to the studies being actually carried out in his department and not anywhere.

Anything big and long winded distracts a reader and is set aside as incomprehensible. If the concept is clear, one can really shorten an article or a case report. After all, discovery of DNA was published as 700 words letter to 'Nature' [5]. In fact, many journals and authors prefer 'Letters to Editor' or at the most 'Brief Communication' as these take less time and effort to write and publish.

Temptation to increase the tally is too heavy for some to resist - hence false and unscrupulous articles. It is just not healthy to be caught by the editors, referees or ever vigilant readers. It should not be considered beyond the scope and responsibility of Commanding Officers to satisfy themselves on the veracity and authenticity of the articles and the authorships while affixing their signature on the certificates.

The standard or reputation of a journal is a changing state determined by standard of articles being published in it. MJAFI is no less than other national journals. It will become even better if you reserve your best papers for your own MJAFI. Only reason to publish outside should be its technical quality meant for a highly specialised group.

There is lot of joy in writing and publishing and prospective authors will do well by putting some effort into it - Always consult latest Guidelines for Authors (MJAFI Oct 1992) before starting the endeavour.

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