



Enhancing the Quality of Research Publication: AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean

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Help is needed to close the gaps in knowledge dissemination and access

One of the current barriers to international knowledge-sharing is the assortment of obstacles to publication that non-native users of English from resource-limited settings must overcome.¹ In some countries, efforts to build research capacity are hampered by limited access to English-language resources for the professional development and training of researchers, science editors and peer reviewers. Throughout the Eastern Mediterranean region, infrastructural, linguistic, economic and even political factors can limit access to professional development tools for both researchers and publication gatekeepers (editors and peer reviewers). Iran is a special case because despite the country's well-developed university system and active academic community, economic sanctions can make it difficult for scientists to obtain reference works and self-training resources.

Hooman Momen, Special Coordinator for the Promotion of Multilingualism in the World Health Organization, has drawn attention to the recent increase in efforts to help developing-country researchers publish successfully. But significantly, he recognized that the current capacity of these initiatives is insufficient:

"...an array of editors (language editors, author's editors, copy editors, technical editors and manuscript editors) is valiantly bridging the gap by trying to harness the output of scientists, whose mother tongue is often not English, within the syntax and grammar of the English language. They often succeed brilliantly, but the demand is so great and is increasing so quickly for the small and stagnating number of editors, that change needs to occur".²

In most developing countries, access to high-quality on-site editorial mentoring is limited or nonexistent. AuthorAID

projects³ are designed to overcome inequities in access to publication assistance by facilitating contacts between researchers and volunteer advisors. These advisors include scientific experts, journal gatekeepers, professional language editors and author's editors. The AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean (AAEM) project⁴⁻⁶ aims to increase the dissemination of research results from Eastern Mediterranean countries through editorial mentoring. AAEM advisors help researchers prepare manuscripts to a high standard of linguistic and editorial quality, and help editors strengthen the science journals published in the region. AAEM sometimes works via email but also provides on-site author-editing, journal management support and training.

It was at the Third Regional Conference on Medical Journals in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, held in Shiraz in early 2006,⁷ where the idea for an AuthorAID project focussed on the Eastern Mediterranean region arose. The Eastern Mediterranean Association of Medical Editors (EMAME), which organizes periodic meetings⁸ and communicates through its active email list, has made it possible to share knowledge and gain insights into journal editors' priorities for publication capacity-building.

Because academic promotion is closely linked with the number of articles published in prestigious journals, academics whose native language is not English are in great need of help from author's editors and other publication mentors. The trend towards publishing in high-impact-factor journals means that "academia must become acquainted with the general principles of scientific writing and acquire skills to write in English".⁹ At the same time, local English-language journals are growing in number - a situation that creates great challenges in terms of editing the many accepted manuscripts ready for publication. In order to face these challenges,

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Shiraz University of Medical Sciences (SUMS) as well as other Iranian universities have developed Clinical Research Development Centers, where local author's editors work alongside statisticians and research methodology experts. The on-site editors and mentors help scientists develop their research proposals, assist them with the statistical analysis of their findings and guide them through the English editing of their drafted manuscripts. These centers also organize workshops on scientific writing and other aspects of health-related publishing.

The ideal host institution

The first on-site phase of AAEM was hosted by Shiraz University of Medical Sciences (SUMS) in Shiraz, Iran¹⁰ from January to June, 2009. SUMS was established over 50 years ago and is one of the most prestigious medical institutions in Iran.¹¹ At SUMS English was the language used for instruction until 1979, and one of the oldest English-language medical journals, the Iranian Journal of Medical Sciences (formerly Pahlavi Medical Journal), is one of its proudest heritages. SUMS faculty members and post-graduate students, like many of their colleagues in other Iranian universities, are highly motivated to perform state-of-the-art research and disseminate their findings by publishing them in renowned national and international journals.

As one of the pioneers in health research and publishing, SUMS has also obtained approval from the Iranian Ministry of Health and Medical Education to run a master's program in medical journalism, which is one-of-a-kind in the Eastern Mediterranean region. However, to successfully face the challenges of full participation in the international community of knowledge producers, SUMS as well as other major universities in Iran and the region need assistance in training and upgrading the infrastructure of their medical journals.

Thanks to its heritage of high-quality research publication and culture of excellence, SUMS was able to become the first partner and local host for the AAEM project. The location of Shiraz close to the geographic centre of the Eastern Mediterranean region facilitates travel to other eastern Mediterranean countries, and it is hoped that researchers and editors in the region will take advantage of the project. Although AAEM has worked mainly with health science editors and researchers so far, it is intended to support research writing, editing and publishing in a broad range of scientific disciplines. Any interested center can host AAEM for on-site collaboration.

What has AAEM done so far?

To date many of the approximately 120 manuscripts that

have been improved by author-centred editing and revision have been accepted for publication. Verbal feedback from researchers identified the following as the most important outcomes of editing sessions: (i) manuscripts more likely to satisfy gatekeepers' expectations for quality, (ii) acquisition of writing and editing skills and (iii) increased confidence in the value of their scientific work. Manuscript editing sessions at the Clinical Research Development Center of Namazee Hospital and the Research Consultation Center of the SUMS Medical School also provided excellent training for researchers and staff author's editors, who often found insightful solutions to editorial issues while they participated in the sessions. The editorial offices of medical journals provided a productive environment for manuscript editing, guidance on best editorial practices and advice on becoming indexed by PubMed and Thomson Reuters' Web of Science. At each editorial office, the motivation to strengthen the journal as an international source of high-quality research was remarkable.

Talks and workshops on editorial ethics and editorial policies are a part of AAEM's training activities. More than a dozen presentations for medical students, researchers, author's editors and journal editors have been given at universities and scientific conferences. A workshop on research publication ethics developed by AAEM's co-coordinators reviews current policies and draws attention to some evolving recommendations about ethical behavior that may be unfamiliar to authors and editors in the Eastern Mediterranean. Another way the project has contributed to efforts to strengthen the quality and impact of non-western research publications is through the workshop titled "Role of regional and national journals in international knowledge flow and transfer".

The AAEM volunteer coordinators and editors receive no honoraria, and expenses incurred by travel to workshops and other training events in Iran and other countries are covered by local organizers. This economic model keeps administration and its associated expenses to a minimum, and ensures that researchers and journal editors do not have to pay for the support they receive from AAEM. Moreover, all AAEM training materials are made available on request to colleagues who would like to receive them.

By putting researchers (often in the East and South) in contact with colleagues and mentors (often from the West and North), AuthorAID projects help ensure that developing-country researchers are as well equipped as their peers in better-endowed research environments to participate in the international scientific knowledge community. AAEM empowers authors to feel confident in their data, their own words and their right to be respected members of their international scientific community. By helping researchers become published authors, and by supporting journals in the region, AAEM helps connect researchers in emerging national and regional scientific communities to the global



knowledge community.

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