

---

## Editing around the World

---

### The Africa Journals Partnership Project

**Muza Gondwe**

Editor, *Malawi Medical Journal* mgondwe@medcol.mw

African medical journals face several economic and social challenges in disseminating research findings to scientists and health practitioners. Most African journals are owned by academic institutions, are not indexed in major databases, are poorly funded, have poor circulation, and have difficulties maintaining publication schedules.<sup>1-3</sup> Currently, only 38 of the 5200 journals indexed in Medline are from Africa, and they represent 13 African countries. As of December 2007, among 6700 journals in ISI's Science Citation Index, only 20 were from Africa (four countries; only one on medicine). The vast majority of local researchers choose to publish in western journals, which have higher impact factors and larger circulation, leaving local journals with inadequate and poor quality submissions.<sup>4,5</sup>

In September 2003, the US National Institutes of Health through the Fogarty International Center (FIC), National Library of Medicine (NLM), and National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), funded a meeting in the UK that was hosted by the *BMJ* (British Medical Journal). The outcome of this meeting was the establishment of the Africa Journals Partnership Project, a mechanism to enhance the quality of four African journals. The four journals were chosen because they are in countries which have NIH-funded research and are part of the communication network developed by NLM for the Multilateral Initiative on Malaria. Partnerships were forged between African Health Sciences, Uganda, and the *BMJ*; *Ghana Medical Journal* and *The Lancet*; *Malawi Medical Journal* and *JAMA* (the journal of the American Medical Association); and *Mali Medical* and two US journals: *Environmental Health Perspectives* and the *American Journal of Public Health*.

Consultative meetings held with the editors of the African journals identified common challenges:

- Poor technological infrastructure, inadequate funding, and lack of human resource and technical skills to efficiently manage journal operations and maintain regular publication.
- Poor technologies for editorial functions such as peer review and the absence of systems for distribution, production, and marketing.
- Poor visibility and a limited web presence, due to not being indexed in a major database and lacking the capacity to build and maintain a journal website. As a result of this poor visibility, local authors were reluctant to submit their manuscripts, leading to an inadequate number of submissions and to poor quality manuscripts being submitted.

In addition there were problems with recruiting peer reviewers, lengthy turnaround time for review, and poor quality of reviews.

Nine tasks were defined to address the challenges faced by the African journals:

1. Identify equipment and facility needs of the African journals
2. Identify editorial needs of the African journals
3. Provide computer hardware and software to African journal publishing offices as well as initial training to editorial office personnel
4. Provide training for authors and reviewers
5. Provide training on establishing business plans for effective, sustainable publishing operations
6. Provide support for managing editors and business managers
7. Develop and maintain journal websites
8. Establish internships for representatives of African medical journals at journal editorial offices in the northern hemisphere
9. Commission systematic reviews on topics relevant to sub-Saharan Africa.

#### Project activities

The project's activities were funded by the NIH (through NLM and FIC) and facilitated by the Council of Science Editors (CSE) and led by the project coordinators Annette Flanagan of *JAMA* and Tom Goehl of *Environmental Health Perspectives*. To address the lack of technology infrastructure, detailed technical reports were developed by IT consultants for each journal. Using those reports, equipment – phones, computers, scanners, and software – was procured for each journal, and staff were trained.

Visits were arranged between partner journals in order to familiarize the African journals with editorial and publications practices in the western journals. Western journal partners also visited their African counterparts to appreciate the challenges that the African journals face. During the visits, the African editors were able to observe editorial and publishing practices, attend editorial meetings, and meet staff of their partner journal.

An important component of the project is capacity building. The editors of the African journals have participated in short courses on journal editing, publication management, manuscript editing, and statistics during the annual CSE meetings. The annual CSE meetings also provide an opportunity for all the journal editors and funders to meet to evaluate the project and discuss project plans and activities.

To improve the number and quality of manuscripts submitted and improve the quality of peer review, the African editors have organized local and regional workshops for authors and reviewers. To date a total of eight workshops have been conducted in Uganda, Mali, Malawi, and Ghana with over 100 authors and reviewers trained. These workshops also act as key opportunities for the journals to market themselves and increase their local visibility. The first set of workshops was facilitated by international experts and laid a foundation for the African editors and local experts to facilitate further workshops themselves. Additionally, the editor from the *Malawi Medical Journal*, Muza Gondwe, has attended a Tim Albert "Train the Trainer" course on writing journal articles and getting them published.

Financial sustainability is a key challenge faced by a majority of journals in developing countries. To address this, a workshop on journal sustainability and business operations was held in Malawi in February 2007 which was facilitated by the International Availability of Scientific Publication (INASP).

Six journals – *African Journal of Medicine and Medical Sciences*, *East Africa Medical Journal*, *Psychopathologie Africaine*, *Tanzania Health Research Bulletin*, *Revue Internationale des Sciences Médicales*, *Sudanese Journal of Public Health* – from the Forum for African Medical Editors (FAME) also attended this workshop with funding from the Special Program for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (TDR).<sup>6</sup> The outcome of this workshop was the development of long-term and short-term strategic plans for each journal, with a focus on financial and business evaluation and planning.

ScholarOne has donated Manuscript Central, an online manuscript tracking system. Two out of the four journals have implemented the system, and one is in process of doing so. Through a stipend from partnership funds, a full-time person has been employed at each journal to run the journal.

### Successes

Excellent progress has been made on seven out of nine tasks. One of the most important objectives for this project is to have all four journals indexed in Medline. *Mali Medical* was successful in its application for inclusion in Medline in 2006 and *Africa Health Science* in 2007. *Malawi Medical Journal* has applied and will be reviewed in October 2008.

All of the African journals have commented that the partnership project has met their needs, citing improvements in editorial processes, business operations, journal management, timely publications, increase in number of and quality of submissions, and improved web visibility. Performance indicators show an increase in manuscripts submitted (*African Health Sciences*, 109 in 2005 and 169 in 2006; *Mali Medical*, 76 in 2005 and 90 in 2006) a decrease in acceptance rate (*African Health Sciences*, 50% in 2005 and 27% in 2006); an increase in international submissions (*African Health Sciences*, 70 in 2005 and 125 in 2006); an increase in the number of reviewers (*African*

*Health Sciences*, increased by 85 in one year – half of whom are international).

The project is not simply a partnership but a network promoting south to south collaboration, where the African journals share experiences and knowledge with each other. The *African Health Science* journal representative visited the *Malawi Medical Journal* to receive training on the Manuscript Central system in May 2008. The use of this online system has decreased reviewer time, increased visibility of the journal, and enhanced journal management and editorial workflow.

The journals all recognize the significance of having journal websites. *Mali Medical* and *Malawi Medical Journal* are freely available on their own websites, and *African Health Science* and *Ghana Medical Journal* are freely available on PubMedCentral. Thanks to a donation of xml conversion services from SPi, *Ghana Medical Journal* and *African Health Science* have their back content on PubMedCentral, with *Malawi Medical Journal* striving to do so.

The African editors found the visits to their western counterparts a good learning experience and were able to pick up tips on various workflow practices, such as appraising manuscripts and journal production, that they have been able to apply to their local journal. The visits and editorial training have motivated the editors to make more and better use of the editorial board, from identification of peer reviewers to advice on policy issues.

The African journals editors attended annual meetings of the Council of Science Editors in three consecutive years. These meetings have enabled editors to receive training, partake in meetings on subjects relevant to editing in the developing world such as AuthorAID, network with editors from across the world, make presentations, and join CSE committees.<sup>7</sup> CSE has made available complimentary memberships for the African journal editors and supports their attendance at the meetings and workshops.

### Challenges

The project has been very successful in achieving its goals. However, two tasks remain to be completed: the establishment of internships at the western journals, and the commissioning of systematic reviews. After consultation with the African partners, these tasks were modified in 2007 to internships at African journal offices to address the issue of editorial succession, and commissioning of rigorous (rather than systematic) scientific reviews.

In order to monitor the progress of the project, routine data needs to be obtained - and without systems in place this has proved to be a challenge. The Manuscript Central tracking system will hopefully improve retrieval of performance indicators like numbers of submissions, speed of decision making, and performance of peer reviewers. This data will produce information for use in the long-term evaluation of the project and, more importantly, it will enable editors to easily evaluate their own journals over time. Uptake of the system has been slow, however. The lack of a French version of Manuscript Central is a barrier to successful uptake for *Mali Medical*.

Perceptions of authors, reviewers, and readers are also important in evaluating a journal. In the future, the journals hope to conduct surveys to determine these perceptions.

### The future

The project has been awarded a second grant for another five years. This grant will support the four existing partners, as well as two other journals which are yet to be selected. This grant is focused on better meeting the needs of the journals, supporting areas such as online publishing, updating of equipment and software, support for an intern, continued support for author/review workshops, and workshops on communicating science to journalists and policy makers.

The achievements of this project would not have been possible without funding from NIH and administrative support from CSE. Activities of the project have also been supported by SPi, TDR, INASP, and ScholarOne.

This project has formed friendships and networks that will extend past the lifetime of the project. With continued support from all stakeholders, this project can and will make a significant impact on African journal publishing.

### References

1. Siegfried N, Busgeeth K, Certain E. Scope and geographical distribution of African medical journals active in 2005. *South African Medical Journal* 2006; 96(6):533–538.
2. Tijssen R. Africa's contribution to the worldwide research literature: New analytical perspectives, trends, and performance indicators. *Scientometrics* 2007;71(2):303–327.
3. Horton R. Medical journals: evidence of bias against the diseases of poverty. *Lancet* 2003; 361(9359):712–713.
4. Uthman OA, Uthman MB. Geography of Africa biomedical publications: an analysis of 1996-2005 PubMed papers. *International Journal of Health Geographics* 2007;10(6):46.
5. Soteriades ES, Rosmarakis ES, Paraschakis K, Falagas ME. Research contribution of different world regions in the top 50 biomedical journals (1995-2002). *FASEB Journal* 2006;20(1):29–34.
6. Koech DK. A forum for African medical editors is formed in a Geneva meeting. *African Journal of Health Science* 2002;9:112.
7. Freeman P, Robbins A. The publishing gap between rich and poor: the focus of AuthorAID. *Journal of Public Health Policy* 2006;27:196–203

## From the Archive – 30 years ago

### News Notes from *Earth & Life Science Editing* (7), 1978

#### International Serials Catalogue

ICSU-AB, the International Council of Scientific Unions Abstracting Board, has announced publication plans for the largest serials data resource ever compiled. Basic bibliographic facts on over thirty thousand scientific and technical periodicals will be listed, forming a valuable bibliographic reference work as well as serving the prime aim, which was to study coverage characteristics of the nineteen member services of ICSU-AB, and to improve bibliographic accuracy at the input stage of these services.

#### Primary Communications Research Centre Publications

The Primary Communications Research Centre set up at Leicester University in 1976 has recently completed a number of projects of interest to editors in the earth and life sciences. Among them are the following:

The Visual Impact of Scholarly Journal Articles: May Katzen, Nov 1977

A study of the evaluation of research papers by primary journals in the UK: M Gordon, April 1978

Trends in scholarly communication in the United States and Western Europe: May Katzen, March 1978

Scholarly Publishers Guide: New Methods and Techniques (1st edition): Sept 1977

#### Writing Scientific Papers in English

A paperback edition of the very successful guide by M O'Connor and Peter Woodford, *Writing Scientific Papers in English*, is to be published in September 1978 by Pitman Medical & Scientific Publishing Co Ltd, 42 Camden Road, Tunbridge Wells, Kent TN1 2QD, England. The expected price for the new version is £1.25.

#### Footnote

Owing to non-receipt of some copy the editors regret that the **News Notes** and **Editor's Bookshelf** sections of this issue have had to be drastically abbreviated.