Professional medical writing support: The need of the day

The research cycle is not complete without communicating its findings to the scientific fraternity. Publishing research benefits science, its application to practice, and helps other researchers design their own experiments. Publishing biomedical research is especially important because it helps enhance understanding of health, diseases, and their management and improves medical practice, benefitting the entire human society. Clinicians and academic scientists must realize the importance of publishing their research which is not only an ethical and a moral obligation but also a due culmination of the research process.

Today, considering both electronic and print media and open access publishing, the array of biomedical journals and publications has increased exponentially. Still, only part of the research done gets published. In an analysis of 600 randomly selected clinical trials listed on clinicaltrials.gov for which results were posted on the database, only 50% were found published in a journal. This means that findings of half the research are not communicated to the scientific world, which is a great loss to the society and is unfair to the patients participating in these studies. Even for those studies whose results are published, negative findings and adverse events were less completely reported in publications as compared in database.

REASONS FOR NOT PUBLISHING

Although most clinicians and academic scientists understand the need to publish their work, majority of them cite lack of time to write or submit as the main reason for not attempting to publish. Other reasons could include inadequate data analysis support, lack of awareness of current reporting guidelines and publication practices, or even inadequate technical writing expertise. Moreover, all these factors could lead to poor quality of writing, resulting in higher rejection rates from established, peer-reviewed journals.

The current issue of the journal reports an important Indian survey undertaken with 100 surgeons attending the National Conference which shows that over half of the respondents had never published their work, citing either lack of time or lack of data analysis support as the main reasons for not publishing. There was also a poor awareness of the fact that professional medical writing support is available and ethical to take. The respondents expressed a great deal of interest in utilizing such a service, if available locally. Although there are limitations to this study such as a small sample size that included a captive set of respondents belonging to one clinical specialty and lack of anonymity for their response, it brings out a very important issue that constrains the spirit of scientific communication in this country, despite having a great degree of clinical expertise. According to the analysis by the Nature Index 2015– Asia-Pacific, Indian scientists published far less science papers than China in 2014 and trailed behind Japan, South Korea, and Australia.

PROFESSIONAL WRITING SUPPORT – WHY HIRE A PROFESSIONAL MEDICAL WRITER

Medical writing is the science of communicating biomedical data to appropriate target audiences such as the regulators, health-care professionals or patients, and general public to achieve certain objectives. A researcher may be excellent at his/her work but may not necessarily have the requisite technical writing skills to present their data and findings in the most effective manner. A professional medical writer (PMW) is the technical writing expert with a biomedical degree (probably an advanced one such as a PhD) and has a sound understanding of biomedical research methodologies and knowledge of the current reporting guidelines as well as publication practices. He/she would have substantial data analytical skills with understanding in statistics. A PMW can help the researchers to analyze, organize, and present their data most effectively to achieve a set objective such as getting published in a respected journal, getting additional research funding, or finding acceptance for their work by their professional peers or the regulators.

One must realize that medical writing is not the same as ghostwriting which makes surreptitious use of another writer without disclosing or acknowledging their contribution. In scientific world, using a PMW for writing assistance is legitimate and is permitted as per the international publication guidelines as long as their contribution is appropriately acknowledged.

A PMW makes a substantial contribution to make the research publication worthy. Benefits of hiring a PMW
are many. In addition to the technical writing assistance, a PMW offers the following:7

• Achieve conformity with the current reporting and publication standards such as the Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials or the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors guidelines
• Guidance on the choice of publication/authorship requirements/good publication practices
• Editorial support (editing and journal styling)
• Manuscript submission
• Managing timelines and coauthor reviews.

The value that a PMW brings to the manuscript has been clearly demonstrated in the form of enhanced reporting and writing quality and greater speed of acceptance by the journals.8

PROFESSIONAL MEDICAL WRITING SUPPORT – AVAILABILITY AND AWARENESS

Although exact data on the number of PMWs in India are difficult to find, the number could be in the range of 1000–1500, with a sizable majority being employed in the knowledge processing organization, business processing organization, or clinical research organization.9 A few mostly experienced writers could be operating as freelance medical writers. The pharmaceutical industry is well aware of and routinely utilizes professional medical writing services. There are service providers who can provide regulatory or safety writing services or expertise in medical communication and publication writing. However, clinicians and academic researchers may not be aware that such a service is available and its use is ethical. The cost of hiring a PMW is not substantial; nevertheless, it can be a concern for an individual researcher or a clinician. They should consider this cost while planning their research budgets and take advantage of professional medical writing support to enhance the presentation and publication – worthiness of their work. They could also request pharmaceutical sponsors for a grant or assistance.

In summary, current awareness and prevalence of professional medical writing support among individual researchers and clinicians is minimal. Professional medical writing is an ethical service that can enhance the quality of research reporting and speed up the publication process. Better understanding of the role of a PMW and their appropriate use by clinicians and academic researchers will help timely and effective communication of their research findings to the scientific world. Biomedical science and clinical medicine can greatly benefit from such a practice.

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