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Editorial

SMJ – Moving Ahead, 2000 and Beyond

C Rajasoorya

The Singapore Medical Journal (SMJ) has come a long way from its humble beginnings in March 1960, under the able leadership of Dr Gwee Ah Leng who saw the journal through conception, delivery and growth into adulthood. In the 12 years as its editor, his task was immense, unenviable and arduous. His editorials were frequently quoted by other periodicals and the lay press⁽¹⁾. His long-ranging vision is so noticeably reflected in the very first editorial of the SMJ in which he highlighted the importance and relevance of ethics in the practise of medicine, paying particular caution to the danger of medicine without ethics⁽²⁾. It is not surprising that after 40 years, this comment remains relevant and topical. The unquestionable high standards he preserved along with his high personal sacrifice, no doubt, has been well acknowledged duly by the medical community in Singapore.

Many distinguished successive editors have been instrumental in maintaining the high standards and nurturing the SMJ to its current enviable position. Over the four decades, Drs Tan Kheng Khoo, Lim Pin, Feng Pao Hsi, Chee Yam Cheng, Tan Choon Kim and, more recently, Kua Ee Heok have sought to improve the standard of the journal together with their editorial teams. The success of their efforts is well reflected in the increasing journal submissions and readership, the greater regional and international participation, the longer waiting period for publication and higher rejection rate. We must not forget to acknowledge the immense participation, enthusiasm and efficiency of the Editorial Assistants and their team have in this success story.

Just as it is difficult to make an asymptomatic patient feel any better, it is difficult to improve on a good and reputable journal – that however must not mean we rest on our laurels and resist change. Change is inevitable. Changes may be cosmetic or may involve an amendment to perspective, priorities or presentation. It may be an alteration utilising technological advances like electronic submission or a climb to increase the impact factor of the journal. Whether the change is insidious or rapid, we must take time to ponder periodically. We may applaud and consolidate on our successes. When faced with failures or setbacks, we must not only accept our errors, but also take steps to revert course and prevent recurrences. Changes may be evolutionary or revolutionary. It can come as a paradigm shift. We must however caution ourselves against a “paradigm paralysis” with a discomfort to the majority. As succinctly summarised by my predecessor “the medical journal is like a living organism; it grows, matures and seeks new directions”⁽³⁾.

Towards achieving this objective of change – as a start, it would be desirable to see the Singapore and regional medical profession contributing some of their best papers to improve the impact factor by considering publication in the SMJ, as the first choice. This would, off course, mean greater recognition for the work locally and regionally and perhaps a more equitable reward in their career, contrary to the current trend of having international publications given more credence rather than local publications. As pointed out by Dr Chee YC, the SMJ also encourages its writers to

move away from the traditional stereotype “that negative findings, lack of correlation or absence of an earth-shattering result makes an article worthless”⁽⁴⁾. The SMJ will continue to accept case reports, and interesting or unusual cases of teaching and educational value. The journal still subscribes to the philosophy that good, well-documented individual case reports have contributed tremendously to advances in medicine. As well expounded in a previous editorial, the medical journal “should not only be a passive reporter of research results”⁽⁵⁾. The SMJ will continue in its aim to be current and topical and will also include discussions on some controversial and provocative aspects of medicine including medical ethics, molecular medicine, cost-effectiveness in medicine, managed health care and new technologies in medicine.

Despite the inclusion of new and modern aspects of medicine, the journal will not neglect the needs of the majority of the readership. The contents will continue to strike a balance between the specialist and the non-specialist. The editorial board will continue to explore introducing newer sub-sections that are of benefit to the general educational philosophy of keeping doctors in specialities and general practice abreast of developments in current medical practise. Sections devoted to practical advice on diagnosis and management, simplistic approaches to seemingly complex problems, and occasional reviews will be features we would like to expand upon. These would be tailored to meet the demands of local practice. Shorter articles, which are concise and with clear and crystallised thoughts would pose less space constraints on a journal with limited space.

As one of the positive indicators of the popularity of the journal, the current waiting period from submission to acceptance for publication is up to a year with more than 100 articles awaiting publication. This phenomenon, while an encouraging credit to the journal, has the “danger of losing potential valuable contributions put off by the delay in publication”⁽⁶⁾. We will have to work on a scheme to reduce the review-and-waiting period. The balance between higher rejection rate and higher quality submission is a tenuous one requiring fine-tuning. We must however guard ourselves against a very restrictive editorial policy as this could paradoxically endanger the popularity of the journal.

I feel privileged and honoured to be given the responsibility to take over as editor of the SMJ, despite the presence of many more capable and experienced individuals. The task is enormous and the challenge great, particularly with the distinguished record of my predecessors. I wish to put on record my appreciation for the confidence and trust, the Singapore Medical Association and its council under its president A/Prof Goh Lee Gan has placed in me. I also wish to thankfully acknowledge the immense and continuing help and support my predecessor Prof Kua Ee Heok and his editorial assistants have provided me over this transition period. As we move to 2000 and beyond, and give ourselves a pat on the shoulder for our past successes, the editor and his team would be more than delighted to hear from any reader on suggestions they may have to bring our SMJ to greater heights – this is our Journal – we are not fighting for survival but rather consolidating on our success over the last 40 years as we move into the new year, decade and millennium. The SMJ must continue to remain a journal that is responsive to the needs of its authors, reviewers and readers.

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