

EDITORIAL

Medical Journals and the English Language

Richard Smith, the long time editor of BMJ, once remarked, “healing the sick is the core of medicine...” yet, healing depends upon various other disciplines. Basic science, public health, medical technology, health care and business all contribute to the final outcome. For that reason, knowledge must be shared through publications in professional journals; they are the primary medium for dissemination of up to date information to all medical professionals.

Throughout the history of medicine, several languages became the *lingua franca* of their time. Most recently, this honor falls to the English language. Although more people worldwide speak Chinese, Hindi or Spanish than English, the latter remains the language of medicine and science. Hence, authors whose native tongue is not English often publish in that language.

Because publication in English can help to promote an author’s academic career, French, Russian, German or Japanese doctors who acquire new and important information prefer to publish in the international English language journals rather than in their own national scientific journals. Publications in English are cited on average six times more frequently than those in German, Japanese or French.¹ In 1978 Eugene Garfield showed that similar differences also exist for scientific papers published in Russian vs. English and Spanish vs. English (the data come from the Science Citation Index).² In Russia* 6834 scientific journals are currently published (6426 of them only in Russian), but international visibility of their science is quite modest.³

Thus, linguistic characteristics of medical publications

*During the USSR period, the authorities did not feel the need to switch their journals to English because the American government supported translation of major USSR journals into English. It happens after the launch of the first *Sputnik* in 1956 to be sure that no significant research produced by the USSR scientists would be missed by US scientists. However, from 2006 the Russia started to increase their scientific production in English (domestic and foreign journals). In contrary to relatively small non-English speaking countries who decide to publish majority of their scientific papers in English, large countries (like Russia) that have a very large internal market it would be bad strategy to switch all journals to *lingua franca*.

may greatly enhance the spread of knowledge and recognition of the authors among their peers. Accordingly, the publishers of *Langenbecks Archiv fur Chirurgie*, a German-language journal founded in 1860, decided in 1998 to publish exclusively in English.

Medical publications in many developing countries may use English rather than their own national language to achieve greater international visibility for their journals. The question is, how much does the language switch help? Even if a paper had an excellent impact, of one citation per year, it might be read by only 5-10 percent of local medical professionals. Non-English speaking countries would perhaps need to publish one in ten (or twenty) medical journals in English to make an impact.

Some journals might prefer to publish papers both in English and the local language, although such an approach does not favor inclusion of either old or new medical journals in worldwide databases. The NLM recently reviewed 140 medical journals for inclusion in MEDLINE. Thirty journals published in English were selected along with one with articles in both English and Portuguese. Bilingual journals can provide good practice for the authors in reading, and they tend to enrich international standards in publishing. As a result, English remains the preferred language of regional medical professional specialists. For example, the *Journal of Balkan Union of Oncology* (J BUON) is published in the Balkans.

General medical practitioners spend only about one hour a week reading articles in professional journals. Medical information and exchange of opinions on local medical problems are more efficacious if articles are published in the local language. Many large non-English speaking countries use their local language for dissemination of medical information and advancement of educational topics, but they publish several journals in English as well. In developing countries, journals in English are appropriately more limited, because their goal is to inform colleagues who speak the same language. However, if an important discovery merits more attention, the authors could publish the information in English, in a well-established international journal.

Duplicate publication remains another possibility for non-English speaking authors. The Vancouver group established the prerequisites for duplicate publication, particularly for two different languages. Duplicate publication requires approval from the editors of both journals along with other conditions; indexing within databases requires this to avoid “a publishing misdemeanor.” Before the electronic period, it was an easy process. An example of this modality, common in the 19th Century, is provided by citation of the same publication in Serbian and German:^{4,5}

Lazarević LK. Ischias postica Cotunnii: a contribution to the differential diagnosis. *Srpski Arhiv* 1880;7:23-25. [In Serbian]

Lazarević LK. Ischias postica Cotunnii. Ein Beitrag zu deren Differential-Diagnose. *Allg Wien Med Zeitung* 1884;29:437-438.

Finally, to keep doctors informed and their patients in good health, there must be regular access to information on medical advances. Physicians need to be able to share their experiences and observations via published media. The best solution may be to publish the majority of articles for non-English speaking readers in their local language but include some in English with dual language abstracts or summaries.

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