

# The role of journals in enhancing health research in developing countries

Hooman Momen<sup>1</sup>

Enhancing the scientific and technological capacity of the developing world is once again on the global agenda: a new report by the InterAcademy Council (IAC), an organization created in 2000 by 90 of the world's leading science academies, was presented to the Secretary-General of the United Nations on 5 February 2004 (1). This report follows others that were more specifically related to the field of health, by the Commission on Health Research for Development (COHRED) in 1990 (2) and the Global Forum for Health Research in 1999 (3). These reports focused on sustainable solutions requiring the commitment of governments, funding and academic institutions; progress in achieving their aims has been modest and slow.

Scientific journals play a central role in the dissemination of research results; at the same time, the importance of scientific publication in advancing the careers of research scientists has given them — particularly the top international journals — increased possibilities to influence research priorities (4). Can scientific journals and their editors, therefore, use this influence to help quicken the pace and galvanize health research in developing countries?

A recent meeting of editors of over 30 medical journals, convened by WHO in Geneva, discussed this challenge with specific reference to mental health research. The joint statement issued at the meeting is published in this issue of the *Bulletin* (5). Although the statement is addressed to the discipline of mental health, its principles and suggestions could equally apply to any field of health research.

Access to the international scientific and technical literature has several facets. Researchers in developing countries require access not only as readers but also as authors: for them to feel part of the global science community they need not only to obtain information but also to be able to contribute to it and take part in the global discourse. The low participation of developing-country researchers in the output of the international literature is widely recog-

nized and is a problem which editors of international journals are in a unique position to influence. The catalogue of ideas included in the joint statement contains a number of useful suggestions as to how editors and their journals could assist in stimulating health research in low- and middle-income countries.

The *Bulletin* is an international journal of public health, and we therefore choose articles which we consider have global appeal. In addition, the journal receives the majority of its submissions from developing-country authors and tries, within its resources, to stimulate publication by these authors without creating double standards. Papers are never rejected by the *Bulletin* on the grounds of English language, grammar or syntax but on the basis of not being original or lacking international importance or scientific rigour. All accepted articles undergo thorough technical editing, which is of particular help to authors whose mother tongue is not English. More can be done, however, and the *Bulletin's* editorial committee will be discussing a number of suggestions during the coming year. These range from creating new sections in the *Bulletin* with more appeal to developing-country authors and offering training to editors, to increasing the pool of freelance journalists from these regions for our news stories.

Access to the international health literature would be more useful if there were increased coverage by journals of topics of direct relevance to the health problems of developing countries. This requires a conscious choice by editors to favour these topics, irrespective of the country of origin of the research. Often, authors from developing countries who succeed in publishing in international journals are scientists who were trained in industrialized countries and whose research interests reflects those of the countries where they did their training and have their networks of collaboration. More interest by top journals in the health problems of developing countries would positively influence the topics that such researchers choose to study.

The key to increasing participation by authors from developing countries in the international literature, however, is to increase their skills in designing and conducting research and in reporting the results. Although workshops for authors and researchers can help, strong national and regional journals are the best resource for developing these critical skills on a continuing basis. WHO has fostered the creation of regional associations of medical editors in Africa (6) and in the Eastern Mediterranean region (7). It is hoped that these and similar national associations will stimulate an increase in the quality of regional and national journals. The community of practice of authors, reviewers and editors provides the best training ground to improve the critical thinking and writing skills of researchers. The *Bulletin* has been and will continue to be active in this area. As the IAC report states, "enhancing scientific and technology capacity in developing countries is truly a necessity and not a luxury". ■

1. *Inventing a better future: a strategy for building worldwide capacities in science and technology*. Amsterdam: InterAcademy Council; 2004 (<http://www.interacademycouncil.net/report.asp?id=6258>).
2. Commission on Health Research for Development. *Health research: essential link to equity and development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1990.
3. *The 10/90 report on health research 1999*. Geneva, Global Forum for Health Research, 1999 ([http://www.globalforumhealth.org/non\\_compliant\\_pages/report99/1090repo.pdf](http://www.globalforumhealth.org/non_compliant_pages/report99/1090repo.pdf)).
4. Lawrence PA. The politics of publication. *Nature* 2003;422:259-61.
5. Galvanizing mental health research in low- and middle-income countries: role of scientific journals. A joint statement issued by editors of scientific journals publishing mental health research, and Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, WHO, Geneva, January 2004. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 2004;82:227-9.
6. Richards T. Medical editors pledge support for African journals. *BMJ* 2002;325:922
7. First association of medical editors for Eastern Mediterranean Region. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 2003;81:922.

<sup>1</sup> Editor, *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* (email: [momenh@who.int](mailto:momenh@who.int)). Ref. No. 04802