AuthorAID: An international service and chance to serve

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Abstract

Medical and other researchers in developing countries conduct much valuable research. Yet difficulties in writing and publication often prevent this research from being widely known. AuthorAID (http://www.authoraid.info), a project of the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP), was established in 2007 to help address this problem. Aspects of AuthorAID include on-site and online instruction, a resource library, a blog, an e-mail discussion list, small grants, and mentorship. Medical writers can contribute to AuthorAID by volunteering as mentors and assisting in other ways. In addition, AuthorAID resources can help medical writers and the researchers worldwide with whom they work.

Keywords: Capacity building, Developing countries, Mentorship, Publishing, Research, Writing

Medical and other research from developing countries often remains largely unknown. One main reason is that many researchers in developing countries lack training in research communication, lack familiarity with publication and presentation procedures, and lack confidence in their ability to publish and present. The AuthorAID project of the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) is designed mainly to help researchers overcome these barriers and thus to build capacity in communicating research.

The AuthorAID concept originated about a decade ago when Phyllis Freeman and Anthony Robbins, soon to become editors of the *Journal of Public Health Policy*, recognised such barriers and sought a way to give developing-country researchers guidance on writing and publishing. Over the years, others had given medical and public-health researchers in developing countries a variety of workshops and courses on scientific communication. Freeman and Robbins, however, envisioned supplying such guidance largely through the Internet, which was increasingly accessible in developing countries. In particular, they viewed the Internet as a vehicle for one-on-one mentorship in scientific writing.

In 2007, INASP, a charity that focuses on supporting global research communication, established what has become the most extensive and visible of the projects using the generic designation AuthorAID. AuthorAID projects not associated with INASP have included AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean and the AuthorAID project of the International Society for Environmental Epidemiology. In keeping with common usage, this article will refer to AuthorAID at INASP simply as AuthorAID.

AuthorAID (http://www.authoraid.info) is intended to serve developing-country researchers in all disciplines and geographic regions; however, medical researchers and professional medical communicators constitute sizeable parts of the AuthorAID community, as they do in research and scientific communication as a whole. Funding for AuthorAID has come mainly from the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). AuthorAID has evolved to include several main components: on-site and online instruction, a resource library, a blog, an e-mail discussion list, small grants, and mentorship. Overall direction of AuthorAID is provided by Julie Walker, who manages the publishing support activities at INASP. The other main members of the core team are INASP Associates Ravi Murugesan (a consultant in India) and I, who each devote part of our time to the project. A variety of volunteers and others contribute to specific aspects, for example by providing mentorship or translating AuthorAID materials.

AuthorAID components

On-site and online instruction

Starting in 2008, AuthorAID has held several research-communication workshops per year in developing countries. Researchers from the host country and sometimes elsewhere in the region attend. INASP's local coordinators in its partner countries have been of great help in arranging the workshops. Among countries where one or more AuthorAID workshops have occurred are Bangladesh, Colombia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nepal, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, and Tanzania. Some workshops have been held jointly with partners, such as the International Foundation for Science and the Pan Africa Chemistry Network, or have occurred in conjunction with conferences.

Typically, AuthorAID workshops last 2–5 days and include both lectures, which are intended to provide core content, and small-group activities, which are intended to help participants assimilate the content and start applying it to their own work. Previous workshops have focused mainly on how to write and publish journal articles; topics of lectures have included approaching a writing project, the content and organisation of the parts of a scientific paper, and the publication process. Workshops commonly also include material on related topics, such as preparing poster presentations, giving oral presentations, and writing grant proposals; some workshops have dealt mainly with writing grant proposals. In addition, the workshops generally include presentations on effective scientific writing in English and on resources for further use.

In addition to a workshop leader from AuthorAID, each workshop generally has one or more local co-facilitators. Among other things, these co-facilitators help relate the workshop content to the local context and learn to give such workshops themselves.

All attendees are encouraged to share the learning with their colleagues and students. Increasingly, AuthorAID workshops have been followed by train-the-trainer workshops to help in this regard. Several co-facilitators and attendees have gone on to give AuthorAID workshops, and others also have shared content.

As well as imparting knowledge, skills, and confidence, the workshops help publicise AuthorAID, serve as direct opportunity to assess needs, and offer chances to test teaching materials. A limitation, however, is that the workshops reach relatively few researchers per year and that researchers in some high-priority countries lack the opportunity to attend the workshops. To help extend the workshops' reach, AuthorAID has begun giving online courses based on the workshops. The first online course, which was on research writing, was pilot tested in autumn 2011 with participants at the National University of Rwanda. This course is now run two or three times per year. An online course on grant proposal writing was given for the first time in summer 2013.

The AuthorAID online courses, which run for about 5 weeks, use the Moodle platform and are moderated. The number of participants is limited, in order to permit ample interaction and feedback. In some cases, there is a call for applications; in others, candidates meeting given criteria are invited to participate. A specialised version of the research writing course, on writing about research in environmental health, has been held in collaboration with the Blacksmith Institute, an international charity concerned with alleviating pollution problems in low- and middle-income countries. The first offering of the grant proposal-writing course was for women researchers who had applied for AuthorAID grants. Participants in the online courses both complete lessons and participate in a discussion forum; those who satisfactorily complete all assignments, as almost all do, receive a certificate at the end of the course.

For sustainability, AuthorAID is now emphasising the embedding of instruction in developing countries. In other words, it has begun working intensively to prepare researchers and others in such countries to provide research-communication instruction themselves. The first country to be the focus for this embedding is Sri Lanka. Efforts to embed instruction there began in the first half of 2013 with a workshop on teaching research writing online and a more general workshop on teaching research communication. The embedding initiative also will include mentorship and other guidance in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

The AuthorAID online community

The AuthorAID community extends far beyond the researchers served by workshops and courses. In particular, AuthorAID offers a variety of online resources, including a resource library, a blog, and an e-mail discussion list. A Spanish-language version of the AuthorAID website debuted in June 2011.

As of October 2013, the AuthorAID resource library contained more than 600 items. Among them are presentations (largely from AuthorAID workshops), articles and links thereto, and links to relevant websites. The library includes translations

of AuthorAID presentations into Arabic, Chinese, French, Portuguese, Spanish, and Vietnamese; translations into additional languages are being sought. The resource library is searchable by subject area, language, and medium (e.g., article, presentation, video, or weblink).

The AuthorAID blog began in 2007, became weekly in 2008, and now contains three posts per week: a general post on a research-communication topic, a tip of the week, and a resource-of-the-week post. Many of the general posts provide advice on communicating research. Others report on AuthorAID activities, introduce AuthorAID opportunities, or present highlights of relevant conferences. Increasingly, the posts are by researchers in developing countries. All past blog posts are archived in the news section of the AuthorAID website.

The resource library and blog posts are openly accessible, without registration. However, users can benefit from registering on the AuthorAID website. Through registration, one can sign up for AuthorAID's e-mail discussion list, through which researchers can request advice, seek resources, and share information. Registrants also can sign up to be notified by e-mail when new AuthorAID blog posts appear. In addition, registration lets one contact other AuthorAID registrants through the AuthorAID website, for example to obtain a mentor or mentee or to ask questions.

The number of AuthorAID registrants has steadily increased over the years, and as of October 2013, there were more than 7600 registrants, from 183 countries. On registration through the AuthorAID website, each registrant identifies from a standardised list one or more subject areas in which he or she works. Sizeable proportions identify medically related subject areas. As of October 2013, about 1500 registrants had chosen 'Biological Sciences', 1300 'Medicine and Dentistry', 1000 'Subjects Allied to Medicine', and 700 'Veterinary Sciences, Agriculture and Related Subjects'.

During the year from August 2012 through July 2013, there were nearly 64 000 visits to the AuthorAID website, from nearly 34 000 unique visitors. Nearly half of the visits were from returning visitors. The 10 countries from which the most visits came were, in descending order, the United States, India, Nigeria, the United Kingdom, Kenya, Bangladesh, Uganda, Nepal, Pakistan, and Ethiopia. Other sources of at least 1000 visits during the year were Mexico, Canada, Sri Lanka, China, and South Africa.

Small grants

Since 2011, AuthorAID has periodically offered small grants. They are of two types: workshop grants (to give workshops on research communication) and travel grants (to give presentations accepted by conferences). The workshops can employ AuthorAID materials but are not required to do so. The grants are limited to applicants from countries specified as high priority by INASP and its funders; as of mid-2013, eligible countries were Bangladesh, Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Ghana, Honduras, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Nepal, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Uganda, Vietnam, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Competition is stiff, with dozens of applicants for the few grants in each category.

Mentorship

Mentoring was a distinguishing feature of the initial vision for AuthorAID, and it remains an important part of the array of activities. Prospective mentors and mentees can identify and contact each other through the AuthorAID website. In addition, members of the AuthorAID team have helped match prospective mentors and mentees. Once a mentor and mentee decide to work together, they can continue contact through the AuthorAID website or interact through one or more other media, such as e-mail, Skype, and (where feasible) face-to-face meetings. The mentoring relationships can range widely in content and duration. Commonly, the activities centre on helping the mentee write or revise a paper for submission to a journal.

Mentoring resources on the AuthorAID website include an explanation in the form of a comic strip ('The Mentoring Journey'), a brief guide for mentors, and a mentorship learning agreement that mentors and mentees are encouraged to complete and submit. Because the reporting of AuthorAID mentoring relationships is voluntary, and because privacy issues have limited the monitoring of mentorship activities, only limited information currently is available on the scope and outcome of mentorship. Case studies and individual reports indicate that some AuthorAID mentoring relationships have been rewarding and productive indeed. Efforts are now under way to characterise more extensively the mentorship activity that has occurred and to build on it.

AuthorAID and medical writers: Giving and gaining

One thing that does seem clear is that unmet demand for mentors exists. As of October 2013, about 5500 AuthorAID website registrants had indicated that they felt they could benefit from

mentorship, but only about 900 had indicated that they were interested in becoming mentors; for registrants designating the field 'Medicine and Dentistry', the respective figures were about 1000 and about 100. Anecdotal evidence suggests that professional medical writers and editors have been some of the most committed and productive mentors. Serving as an AuthorAID mentor is a chance for medical writers and other medical communicators to provide substantial, and satisfying, international service. It can also be a way for early career medical writers to gain experience, broaden their horizons, and build their curricula vitae.

Medical writers wishing to be of international service also can contribute their expertise to AuthorAID in other valuable ways, some of which need not be very time-consuming. For example, the AuthorAID resource library always is seeking resources on research communication, including ones on medical writing. Suggestions of existing resources, and offers to develop new ones, are gratefully received. Medical writers proficient in languages other than English can help by preparing translations of AuthorAID materials to include on the website. Medical writers can enrich the AuthorAID blog by suggesting topics, posting comments, and offering to write guest posts. Those who subscribe to the AuthorAID discussion list have frequent chances to share their knowledge. On occasion, opportunities may exist for medical writers to help facilitate AuthorAID workshops or online courses. All such contributions are deeply appreciated. Medical writers interested in helping in these or other ways are invited to contact AuthorAID at authoraid@inasp.info to explore possibilities.

Likewise, AuthorAID materials can be resources for medical writers to use and share. The resource-of-the-week post can alert medical writers of new or existing resources to use themselves or to suggest to researchers with whom they work. Similarly, the AuthorAID resource library contains much that medical writers can pass on to researchers wishing to refine their communication skills. Medical writers whose activities include providing workshops or other instruction can employ or

adapt teaching materials in the resource library, and junior medical writers may find materials in the resource library helpful in learning the craft. Similarly, the AuthorAID news archive – which as of autumn 2013 contained more than 600 blog posts – has much that medical writers can use themselves or supply to others. Searching the AuthorAID website can reveal materials on a wide range of topics in or related to medical writing. Although AuthorAID was developed to help researchers in developing countries, much of the content can aid individuals anywhere who are interested in skilful research communication.

If you already are involved in AuthorAID, we thank you for your participation and hope you will remain active or become more so. If you are not involved, we would very much welcome your participation. For both medical writers and the researchers they work with, AuthorAID can be both a service and a valuable chance to serve.

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Conflicts of interest and disclaimers

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