

Medical writing in the Middle East

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Abstract

Medical researchers in Middle Eastern countries have been forced to confront the fact that scientific publication has become the cornerstone of knowledge dissemination and academic promotion. Regional initiatives, such as the foundation of the Eastern Mediterranean Association of Medical Editors and the AuthorAID project in the Eastern Mediterranean, have helped, but challenges remain. The Middle East has taken great steps forward in medical research and writing, but improved training and educational programmes are needed, and the concept, importance, and principles of scientific writing need to be incorporated earlier in existing educational programmes.

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Over the past three decades, Middle Eastern countries have made substantial progress in both conducting and publishing scientific research.¹⁻⁴ For example, the growth rate of science production in Iran is 11 times faster and in Turkey 5.5 times faster than the global average.¹⁻⁴ As the number of research studies has increased in the region, there has also been a sharp rise in the number of scientific journals being published in the region. For example, the number of medical journals published in Iran has increased from less than 10 in the 1970s to more than 450 currently.^{5,6} Medical journalism has also flourished in the Middle East over the last several decades.

Initiatives in the Middle East to promote medical writing

WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean and Eastern Mediterranean Association of Medical Editors
Medical researchers in Middle Eastern countries have been forced to confront the fact that scientific

publication has become the cornerstone of knowledge dissemination and academic promotion. Initiatives aimed at building infrastructures and educational programmes have crucial roles in improving and promoting the medical writing in the region. In 2003, the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean (WHO/EMRO) organised the First Regional Conference on Medical Journals in the Eastern Mediterranean. Journal editors, researchers, and academics gathered at the meeting to discuss issues related to scientific publication, including authorship, editorship, peer-review, plagiarism, and copyediting. At this meeting, it became clear that a regional association of editors was needed to tackle issues related to scientific writing and publication. Thus, a provisional Executive Council for the Eastern Mediterranean Association of Medical Editors (EMAME) was formed (<http://www.emro.who.int/entity/emame>).

EMAME, with the help of WHO/EMRO, created a listserv to attract medical researchers and academics in the region as members. Other than the first meeting in Cairo, EMAME has had four other meetings to date: Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in 2004; Shiraz, Iran in 2006; Manama, Bahrain in 2008; and Karachi, Pakistan in 2010. Prominent regional and international speakers were invited to these meetings to lead panel sessions and workshops dedicated to scientific writing, authorship, editorship, peer review, publication ethics, and copyediting. Gradually, the notion of a medical writer, as it is known in the West, has emerged and has been discussed in various forums.

AuthorAID project in the Eastern Mediterranean

The idea of an AuthorAID project in the Eastern Mediterranean (AAEM) emerged from the EMAME meetings and was initiated in 2009 by Karen

Shashok and Farhad Handjani with the support of Shiraz University of Medical Sciences in Shiraz, Iran.⁷ AAEM matches AuthorAID volunteers with academics and researchers who have prepared manuscripts but need help to improve the English and the manuscript quality. The AAEM project also includes consultations and editorial guidance to regional journals to upgrade their quality and to help them get listed on major indexing systems, and it includes talks and workshops on various aspects of scientific writing and publication. The AAEM project continues to be active and continues to seek volunteers and host institutions.

Institutional scientific writing workshops

Because scientific publication is essential for academic promotion and to compare scientific output between countries, ministries of health and higher education in the region have promoted national and university initiatives to create scientific writing workshops. The number of workshops has increased several fold, and they are now held on a regular basis. Also, in some institutions, special centres have been created to help researchers and academics not only write their manuscripts but also to design study protocols and statistical analysis.

Professional medical writer training

Many freelance medical writers, small medical writing agencies, and associations have arisen to try to respond to the sharp increase in need for manuscript publishing. However, many of the people working professionally as medical writers have not been formally trained. Universities are just beginning to fill the need for training in this area. The first to do so has been Shiraz University of Medical Sciences in Iran, which established a Master's degree in Medical Journalism in 2009.

Challenges faced in the Middle East region

The challenge of publishing in English

Writing itself poses a challenge for many researchers.⁸ Even eminent scientists like Charles Darwin, the creator of the scientific masterpiece, *On the Origin of Species*, once asserted that 'a naturalist's life would be a happy one if he had only to observe and never to write'.⁹ In Middle Eastern societies, due to cultural issues, most people, including scholars, are talented at oral communication but have trouble with writing.¹⁰

The situation is further complicated by the need for medical researchers in the Middle East to publish in English. Interestingly, although

English is currently recognised as the *lingua franca* of science, it has not always been in this position.¹⁰ In fact, for centuries, the Middle East was the centre of science and culture,² and many manuscripts were written in Arabic and Persian, which were the main language of science at the time.¹¹ This shift from East to West is captured in the aphorism *ex oriente lux*. Nonetheless, to increase the chance of being read and accepted by the medical community and of being included in prestigious indexing systems like MEDLINE, many of the journals in the Middle East are published in English.

The challenge of plagiarism

The obligation not only to write but to write in a language other than one's mother tongue is probably the main reason that some scientists in the Middle East resort to plagiarism.¹²⁻¹⁵ Plagiarism can be categorised into two main types: plagiarism of ideas and plagiarism of text.¹⁴ Globally, scientists agree that plagiarism of ideas should be considered a blatant and unjustifiable misconduct tantamount to theft. Recycling of words is also unacceptable where the innovation and the originality of the work are the eloquence and uniqueness of wording used, especially in the humanities and literature. However, there are controversies surrounding the plagiarism of text in reporting science.¹⁵

Based on our experience, the main reason for authors from the Middle East to plagiarise text is because they are disinclined to sacrifice accuracy and quality due to a lack of linguistic expertise; many non-English speakers admit that they find it difficult to resist the urge to 'borrow' a text when it describes what they mean more fluently and clearly than what they can write.¹⁶ Another important reason for plagiarising text is that in some cultures, it is not considered misconduct.¹⁰ In fact, in many developing countries, recycling of words is not an uncommon practice among academics, mostly because they lack a clear declaration that it is considered unethical.

Some researchers question the regulations on plagiarism of text (and self-plagiarism).^{14,15} They argue that in reporting the results of scientific research, the role of the language is to convey the message, no matter how eloquent the text is; the essence of a scientific work is in the content. Unlike literature, where uniqueness of wording is paramount, in scientific writing, we ask the authors to use simple language. Therefore, many feel that reuse of scientific text could be overlooked, particularly for non-English speakers with limited access to professional editorial assistance.

Conclusion

In the last few decades, the Middle East has taken great steps forward in medical research and publishing, but challenges remain. Increased training and educational programmes are needed. Medical researchers need to be better informed about the concept, importance, and principles of scientific writing, topics that need to be incorporated earlier in existing educational programmes. In addition, the profession of medical writing needs to be developed further. Medical writing organisations and groups like EMAME and AAEM should help further advance medical writing in the Middle East.

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Oh, the misery of medical writing

Medical writers work and play with words, but even though we are confronted by kinds of names, rarely do we joke about an author. It is not really prudent. Having said this, I can't help share this reference with you, found one wintry Wednesday while looking for references.... With respect for the author concerned, allow yourself a little snigger, or a wee giggle...

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