

Combined workshops on medical writing and publication ethics for Japanese postgraduate students and faculty members

Takako Kojima,¹ Edward Barroga,² Takashi Yashiro,³ Toshimasa Yoshioka,¹ and J. Patrick Barron²

¹Department of Medical Education, Tokyo Women's Medical University, Japan

²Department of International Medical Communications, Tokyo Medical University, Japan

³Department of Anatomy, Jichi Medical University School of Medicine, Japan

Correspondence to:

Takako Kojima,
Department of Medical
Education, Tokyo
Women's Medical
University, Shinjuku-ku
162-8666, Japan
takako.kojima@
research.twmu.ac.jp

Abstract

Although the importance both of skills in medical writing in English and of an understanding of ethics in medical publishing is increasingly recognised, these subjects are not comprehensively taught to Japanese medical doctors and students. Limited resources, teaching staff, and time prevent most Japanese medical schools from implementing standard educational programmes on these topics. To address this, we developed two brief but intensive programmes of lectures and group-based workshops, each incorporating both medical writing skills and publication ethics; one was for Japanese postgraduate medical students, the other for faculty development. The main topics in the programme for postgraduate students were the *Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals*, and oral and poster presentation skills. The programme emphasised the importance of medical writing skills and of issues, such as authorship and conflict of interest. The faculty development programme covered handling communications with editors and reviewers after manuscript submission, as well as ethical misconduct issues. We believe these programmes provide a unique and effective means of enhancing awareness of publication ethics and improving medical writing skills among professionals in Japanese healthcare institutions.

Keywords: Medical writing, Medical publication ethics, Non-native English speakers

Since the late 1990s, significant changes have been made to medical writing guidelines, such as the

Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals,¹ and the *American Medical Association Manual of Style*,² particularly on ethical aspects of medical publishing, reflecting increased awareness of the need for transparency in publications. However, education in Japanese medical schools in such areas has not reflected this international trend, and a lack of awareness and knowledge of publication ethics has led to professional problems damaging the careers and reputations of some Japanese medical researchers.

In Japan, many medical schools lack appropriate teaching staff and resources to deliver, independently, undergraduate and postgraduate courses on medical English, medical communications and writing, or publication ethics.³ They also lack staff who can together provide editorial support and promote international publications. Nevertheless, some Japanese medical schools, recognising the need for education in these areas, have begun to collaborate with other medical universities, that do offer such educational programmes, to conduct workshop programmes for their students and faculty. At the request of Jichi Medical University School of Medicine our institutions have together, since 2009, developed and conducted annual workshop programmes combining topics related to medical writing and ethics.

Structure of the postgraduate and faculty development programmes

Most of the workshops we delivered in 2009 and 2010 focused on medical writing skills and publishing strategies, such as common mistakes in medical

writing and how to respond to reviewers' comments, presented as lectures with handout materials. In 2011, we decided to incorporate publication ethics into the programme, although doing this effectively demanded a restructured programme involving active participation to maximise understanding of the issues. We developed a programme combining lectures and group-based workshops for the postgraduate students, and a separate programme of lectures and problem-based learning workshops for the faculty, who generally have more experience of scholarly publishing.

Postgraduate programme (2011)

The postgraduate programme consisted of two 2-hour evening sessions. Each session involved a 50-minute lecture and a 50-minute interactive group-based workshop. The topics of the main lectures were (1) fundamentals of the *Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals*, and (2) oral and poster presentation skills, topics that we considered essential for medical doctors with limited experience of writing medical papers in English, and of presenting at international conferences.

One objective of the group-based workshop was to increase active participation and discussions. After a 30-minute introductory talk on authorship and peer review, participants were divided into small groups, given several short sample case descriptions related to the topic (Box 1),⁴ and asked to develop and present answers to set

Box 1 Sample case on guest authorship⁴

A Chinese researcher, using data she obtained during a 2-year fellowship in the USA, writes a paper in Chinese on cardiac bypass. Out of respect to her US mentor, she offers to include his name among the authors of the Chinese paper, even though he reads no Chinese. The mentor understands the kindness of the gesture, and has a general idea of the work and understands the English language abstract.

Questions

- If you were the mentor, what would you do?
- Since the mentor knows that few, if any, of his colleagues will read it, and he does not plan to include it in his list of published papers, is it acceptable for him to agree?

Box 2 General questions on authorship/peer review⁴

- What is a guest author?
- If a journal asks you to peer review a paper, and you find it was written by a friend of yours, what should you do? How about if it were written by someone you intensely dislike?
- Do you agree with the definition of authorship in the Uniform Requirements? Why? Why not?

questions as a group. All groups were given the same questions. In addition, participants were required to answer general questions on the introductory material (Box 2).⁴

Faculty development programme (2011)

The faculty development programme was delivered in one 4-hour evening session, consisting of two 50-minute lectures and one 2-hour problem-based learning activity on publication ethics. These lectures covered more advanced topics than those of the postgraduate programme, such as how to respond to reviewers' comments and interpreting letters from editors-in-chief. Actual letters from editors and comments from peer reviewers were collected beforehand from the expected participants to increase relevance and raise interest.

The problem-based learning activity on publication ethics focused on actual cases notified to the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), an organisation that aims to increase the integrity of academic journals by advising editors on publication ethics.⁵ This session started with a short lecture on COPE and its flowcharts, and participants were introduced to the full spectrum of publication misconduct and to the concept that some widely accepted practices may be unethical.⁶

Participants were then divided into small groups, and were asked to (1) identify the key issue or problem of the given case; (2) refer to the appropriate COPE flowchart; and (3) follow the flowchart and discuss the steps advised, with a final group presentation (Box 3).⁷

Students' responses to the programmes

Each participant filled out a questionnaire asking whether they considered the programme

Box 3 Sample case from COPE website⁷

A paper was accepted and published in journal A, which dealt with a cohort of patients with an unusual respiratory pathogen. A similar paper had been published in an US journal B by the same authors, a few months before. It dealt with more or less the same patients (a few more had been added) and provided some extra secondary outcome data but with the same conclusions.

The editor of journal A considered this to be duplication, but the authors deny this on the grounds that there are further data.

Question

Discuss the steps COPE advises in their flowchart (see COPE website).⁷

worthwhile, what they had learned, and whether the programme had altered their perceptions. Most responses were positive, indicating that these programmes provide effective training in medical writing skills and publication ethics for postgraduate students and faculty. Postgraduate programme participants indicated that their appreciation of the importance of both topics had increased, as had their knowledge of authorship policies, peer review, and conflict of interest. Faculty programme participants indicated that they had gained knowledge on handling communications with editors and reviewers after manuscript submission.

Discussion

We believe that these postgraduate and faculty programmes are unique in combining the teaching of medical writing skills and medical publication ethics in short sessions on 1 or 2 days. The use of English as an international language poses a challenge for many authors, whose native language is

not English.⁸ Japanese medical researchers now face the additional burden of growing international concern about publication ethics. Such researchers, with limited time, writing expertise, or English writing skills are likely to seek medical writing assistance⁹ and, to avoid serious ethical misconduct, they particularly need to understand what is considered ethically acceptable.

With this in mind, postgraduate and faculty development programmes combining medical writing training and medical publication ethics education should be encouraged in Japanese medical schools. These programmes will assist medical researchers with limited time to improve their knowledge of these areas, which is essential for developing their research and publishing careers.

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Author information

Takako Kojima graduated from Rutgers University (NJ, USA) with a BA degree in East Asian Studies and holds an MA degree in Inter-Cultural Studies from Josai International University (Chiba, Japan) where she wrote her MA thesis on the Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals. After working at Tokyo Medical University for 8 years where

she began medical editing, she became full-time Assistant Professor at the Department of Medical Education at Tokyo Women's Medical University in 2009, where she specializes in medical English editing and teaching. She also serves as English language editor for the Japanese Journal of Gastroenterological Surgery and Councilor of the Japan Society for Medical English Education.