

Life of an Editor-in-Chief: First Five Years

I am the Editor-in-Chief of *Croatian Medical Journal (CMJ)*, but people call me “he”. This is because there is another Editor-in-Chief, and this is my wife. I am in charge of everything that does not work, and Mrs. Editor-in-Chief is in charge of everything else, including me.

There is also a number of Editorial Board members. They do nothing. Fortunately, there are other people who work at the editorial office. They are all young, nice and hard working. Nobody knows how they can work with “him”.

Acquisition of New Contributions

Only the scientific journals where I have submitted my papers seem to receive too many articles for publication; the rest are crying for more contributions. *CMJ* is also short of the contributions, and this especially worries Mrs. Editor-in-Chief. So, I am in charge of finding more contributions than we receive.

My method is simple: wherever I go, I ask people for papers, urging them to tell me about the data on the spot. Indeed, most scientists love to talk about their findings, regardless of the place and time of the day. If I decide that the topic is actually not interesting, I say “Good, please write it for me in English, and remember that we use the Vancouver system” – and the paper never reaches *CMJ*. If the topic and research seem promising, I praise the data, the author and *CMJ*, and invite the author to visit our editorial office. There I offer them free coffee, tea or hot chocolate, and display *CMJ* issues with most beautiful covers. If the author is a smoker, I say: “Sure, you can smoke, I am the boss here”, but if he/she is not I agree that the doctors should not smoke. Then we talk and I make notes. At the end of the conversation I enter the notes into my computer, arrange them by numbers, add useful remarks, commendations for the author and his field of expertise, combine them with personal suggestions, print the document and hand it to the author. In return, the author has to give me (at that moment they almost all do) his/her telephone number at work and at home, fax number, and e-mail address, if applicable. The rest is simple: I keep reminding them of the promised article until I get it. I have been unsuccessful with only three authors so far: one died of a heart attack, one committed suicide, and one became the editor-in-chief of a medical journal.

Male authors are especially compliant when asked for the paper in a men’s room, and female authors at parties and funerals.

Since we designed this strategy, we have never had any trouble finding high quality articles for the journal. When the editors of other (numerous) Croatian medical journals ask me whether we receive enough of good articles I say: “Yes!”, just to enjoy watching their faces green with envy. Mrs. Editor-in-Chief does not agree with this: she maintains that we do not receive enough of high quality papers, and that I should do a better job with my friends than discuss politics and play soccer.

Pre-Review of Manuscripts

To my knowledge, pre-reviewing of the received manuscripts is *CMJ*’s original discovery. It is generally believed that almost all great scientific discoveries result from a mistake, fluke or unbelievable coincidences, which occurred after years of scientists’ hard everyday work. Indeed, we experienced the same in *CMJ*, although with somewhat different order of appearance. First, we had tremendous trouble with the texts submitted for publication, and worked hard to get some of them in the form acceptable for publication. Finally, the authors discovered that it is nice to submit their papers to such a journal. We continued with the work, but gave it a scientimetric name – “pre-review”.

The pre-review is a very important discovery.

Even the best authors use the terms and abbreviations that cannot be found in any manual of style and form of the medical journals. Great authors use proportionally great numbers of various devices and chemicals, and, naturally, fail to write the manufacturers' names, cities and countries of residence. They are at the same time mostly unwilling to realize and admit their inconsistencies and mistakes. These authors never reply to editors' cries for the missing details. So, we make them up.

An average author (a) puts in the abstract at least one conclusion which has nothing to do with his/her data; (b) writes too long an introduction, which has little to do with the subject of the paper; (c) does not refer to the authors of the methods used; (c) shows at least some data both in tables and figures ("to be understood better"); (d) repeats these data again in the text ("to be sure they were understood"); (e) writes a long discussion, which simply lists the findings of other authors published during the seventies; (f) writes a "Conclusions" section after the discussion; (g) never lists more than three authors in the references, and never cites correctly a chapter in a book, let alone an abstract in the book of abstracts (they also tend to lose these books); and (h) invariably acknowledges a paid translation from Croatian to English, even when it turns out to be awful. I get angry with these authors and silently send them the manuscript back, accompanied with the instructions to the authors. When they do not respond, I humiliate myself by phoning them. They understood the criticism and are hurt. It takes a lot of time and effort to please them.

The myriad of mistakes of a bad author cannot be either listed or systematized. As a rule, they lose 50% of the patients from the Patients and Methods section to the Results; they have references in the text which do not appear in the list of references; when they mention a reference for the second time in the text they cite it in the list of references again; they have tables which consist of two numbers, and these are percentages with two decimal digits; they do not give an abstract; they have a "Review of Literature" in the title and in the Discussion section; they have Methods within Results, Introduction in Methods, Discussion in Introduction, and figures in the text. We work hard with these authors. Eventually, they start liking us so much that they want to send another paper to *CMJ*.

Average *CMJ* authors are different. They first send us back the notes which I made for them a year ago, and attach to them a short typewritten text in Croatian. So, I write the paper, and ask them for the data. They reply several months later, with tables which do not mean anything, and raw data written by hand. On the basis of this Mrs. Editor-in-Chief (or me, but mine are not good) makes the tables, and we send them back to the authors to check the data. They do this well, but show no sign of cooperation with the references. They are sure that there is no related work reported in the literature, only an abstract published by their boss in the book of abstracts from a meeting held in Belgrade ten years ago. At this point I refer to the member of *CMJ* Editorial Board and order him/her to insert the references and finish the paper. When this is done, I submit the paper to myself.

Review Process

Our review process is relatively simple. We have the list of reliable referees, and send the manuscript to two of them. Some of them reply, and some of the responses are actually reviews of the manuscript. Regardless of what they say, I do what I want. The reviews I use to blackmail the authors.

Acceptance of the Paper

In *CMJ*, a paper is accepted if it is not rejected, or if I like it. However, the acceptance does not necessarily mean that the authors should be happy. When we are through with the reviewers' comments (which, as everybody knows, is not easy at all), we start "Working with the Author - the Sequel". I read the article again, and usually bluff accusing the author that he/she did not fulfill all the reviewers' comments. Most of them admit this immediately, and we do the work together. This is not hard because the reviewers rarely ask for identical corrections, so we do what suits us. Then I accuse the authors that the references are too old, with which they also agree at once. So, I send them to the library, telling them that the people there are extremely kind and would help them find more recent references on the subject. Indeed, the library people do their work perfectly, but the authors return wondering why I am so unpopular there.

After my review, the paper goes to our language editor, usually a young professor of the English language who came to the office two weeks ago, and will leave within a year. The language editor first cannot open the computer file, and when we solve this, she/he stares at the text for two days. Then I ask if there are any problems, and she/he confirms, asking me a number of questions on the meaning of various words. Since I know less than her/him, I advise not to worry, because everything will be solved in the next phase of the manuscript preparation. So, the language editor deletes or adds the articles throughout the manuscript, and prints it double-spaced. The paper then goes to Mrs. Editor-in-Chief. I may say without exaggeration that the real work starts with her. For us others it is a nightmare.

After reading the manuscript, Mrs. Editor-in-Chief first scorns me for negligence, sloppiness and lack of any knowledge of medicine, let alone of the beautiful English language. She thinks that the language editor (whom I selected) is not much better than me, but she/he is young and inexperienced and would hopefully learn something in the future. On the other hand, she complains that the authors do not know what they are writing about, and asks who selected the reviewers (which I did), and if they read the paper at all. So, I go back to the manuscript, call and threaten the author, whom I praised two days ago, and show the language editor, again, where our dictionaries are.

To make a long story short, I admit that nothing helps. So, I go to a place where I can be alone (the best place is my laboratory), and read the paper very carefully, fully concentrated. There I write conclusions in the abstract, shorten the introduction by making the point in its end, put the references in the Material and Methods section (the language editor is therefore sent to the library), merge two tables in one and delete two others, and complete the discussion section (I am best in that). My work is facilitated by the assistance of Mrs. Editor-in-Chief who has already made comments in red ink, with plenty of exclamation marks, and even more question marks (the latter are more difficult for me to correct) on what should have been done in the first place.

If I cannot put the manuscript together, I get angry and hand the work to Mrs. Editor-in-Chief. She does it and never gets angry.

Rejection of the Paper

To be honest, I love to reject manuscripts. I am sure that other editors like it too, but the difference is that I admit it. There are several reasons for that:

1. We work with the authors very hard and the papers we decide to reject really deserve to be rejected.
2. The rejection gives me the opportunity to write an extremely nice letter to the author. I am known as a person who writes many letters, most of them shocking and threatening, and the opportunity to reject a paper sheds a completely different light on my personality. People love my rejection letters.
3. We actually do not reject the paper, but ask the authors to do the impossible. This requires a special skill, which I possess and cherish. An especially strong argument is to refer to the reviewers' comments, particularly foreign ones. The authors recognize these reviews easily, because they are neither in Croatian nor in broken English. The letter ends with an offer to the author to rewrite the paper (in accordance with the reviewers' comments – who slaughtered the work), and enter the review procedure anew. Since I have the Authorship Statement in my files, containing a paragraph that the authors will not withdraw the manuscript without the editors' permission, here I open the door a little, and generously make a hint that the author is allowed to withdraw the article at this point. Then the author invariably withdraws the paper. Within the framework of this procedure, everybody is eventually happy, sometimes even more than if the paper gets accepted.

Desk Top Publishing

I do not know anything about this phase, I do not want to learn anything and I do not want to hear anything about it, either. The bottom line of the story is that we have never managed to establish the balance between the hardware and the software of our computers. Young experts, absolutely best

educated, most intelligent, both in medicine and computers, devoted assistants to the editors-in-chief, perform this job. Mrs. Editor-in-Chief, who knows everything about computers, who desk top published, edited, corrected, and in the greatest part wrote our first issues during the 1991 war (and all this on a PC 386), supervises the job. I am supposed to relax, not worry, believing that they will do the job.

But they never do! In a certain phase of the process I find a young computer wizard pale and depressed in our office: he gave up, because the Croatian electric current is so unstable that the computers cannot work. (Mine works!) Then I turn to the chief computer wizard, who works next door, and probably invented computers. He is a nice guy, and arrives immediately. He tries something for several painful hours, but it does not work. Then they talk in a language which I do not understand, glancing at me after each sentence, which I can first understand as an accusation and after that as a message that we should buy something new for the computer. I get angry (without showing it), and turn to my last resort, hope and consolation, Mrs. Editor-in-Chief. She is nice and understanding (I should not worry, but relax) – and everything ends up by talking me into spending all our money on buying new software or hardware. I always give in because I hate this discussion.

Then we start buying: when we buy software, the hardware does not fit, when we buy hardware, the software is outdated. So, how do they make the journal? I do not know – they do something, but only for the current issue. I have to buy new software (or hardware, whichever comes first) for the next issue.

Proof Reading

I often have the strangest feeling that reviewers do not read the articles. But I am also sure that authors never read the galley proofs of their articles. So, we read them, especially because we do the desk top publishing, and the galley proofs are at hand.

I hate being the first one to read the galley proofs, because, up to that point, I have read the article for many times, and I even wrote some of them (those I can read). Then the language editor reads the galleys, but she/he clearly shows that she/he hates this, and, besides, she/he is young and inexperienced, so we do not take this seriously. In the meantime we send the galleys to the authors. Half of them do not return the galleys, and the other half do not see anything wrong. Mrs. Editor-in-Chief reads the galleys last (the computer wizards are out, buying something). Then it becomes obvious how superficially I have read the galleys, i.e., she finds many misspellings, which should have been noticed by everyone. But this is not the worst: Mrs. Editor-in-Chief discovers that some references are not listed in the order of appearance because the author had to remove some paragraphs, add a new figure and merge two tables; one figure is too dark, the other too light, and one is missing. Do I need to list the rest: the tables have incomplete titles, the date of acceptance is not only missing but is also unknown, one out of eight authors has only an initial, with the full name missing, we are not sure whether the microc