

Can We Develop Top Medical Journals in Portugal?

É Possível Desenvolver Revistas Médicas de Topo em Portugal?



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There are four Portuguese medical journals that have an impact factor and Acta Médica Portuguesa is currently the only general medical journal in Portugal with one.¹ Its current position (131st out of 155) in the group of journals included in Clarivate Analytics's category "Medicine, General and Internal" reflect a massive distance in terms of scale, resources, prestige and visibility in comparison with the top-ranked general medical journals, which is realistically very difficult if not impossible to match. It does not mean, however, that medical journals based in Portugal lack quality. What makes a medical journal great in the first place? Having a high impact factor of course helps, but it is still one of many existing metrics. Several authors mention factors such as sound finances, good editorial staff, reliable reviewers and efficient peer review processes, quality of submissions, responsive readers, active use of open access models, ability to deal with research misconduct and of course having relevance to clinical practice.^{2,3} I can think of many other factors: having a good set of values, robust editorial processes, an efficient workflow management system, good editorial policies, editorial independence, engaging in editorial outreach, and I could go on and on.

I am personally convinced that without a well resourced editorial team and robust editorial processes it is difficult for any medical journal to have quality and to thrive. Even though we succeed in publishing a new issue of the journal every month, the editorial team of Acta Médica Portuguesa remains under-staffed for the volume of work we currently handle. Without more editorial assistants and more associate editors as well as in-house statistical and research methodology editors we will struggle to become more efficient, and without additional staff with other types of expertise like business development it will be difficult to develop and grow the journal.

Nevertheless, we have been strengthening the editorial processes of Acta Médica Portuguesa not only because it does not require a substantial investment in resources, but because it can dramatically improve the satisfaction of authors and their perception of feeling fairly treated regardless of the editorial decision as well as the quality of the content we publish. It also forms the backbone of what

we do and is ultimately what will determine the journal's credibility. Seasoned editors are well aware of the gratitude sometimes expressed by authors when they see their paper published, which in most cases has improved dramatically compared to the version that was initially submitted. Having a professional editorial team and robust and fair editorial processes in place is, in great part, what enables such improvements.

Editorial processes in many journals include a broad range of standards and tasks that cover the period before submission (e.g. instructions for authors and dealing with pre-submission inquiries), the period after the manuscript is submitted (e.g. plagiarism detection, peer review, holding editorial meetings, making editorial decisions, sending decision letters) and the period after the manuscript decision has been relayed to the authors (e.g. dealing with appeals and complaints).^{4,5}

Holding editorial meetings among the team of editors (including a statistician) in order to make editorial decisions about submitted papers that have already undergone peer review would be highly desirable but it is not yet possible just yet to implement such feature at Acta Médica Portuguesa. If such meetings are followed by the disclosure to the author, in the decision letter, of whether an editor had to excuse oneself from the discussion or not because of perceived conflicts of interest, and what was discussed at the meeting, in particular, what was the rationale for rejecting a paper or not, then the whole process becomes much more transparent, constructive and reassuring for the author. These meetings are particularly relevant in the case of research papers and have the potential of strengthening the editorial independence of the journal by making the whole process more immune to potential external and internal pressures. It is simple, every single author, regardless of name and position, would have to go through this process.

Some journals like The BMJ have developed very open and transparent editorial processes. These include the need to submit appropriate reporting guidelines along with the paper, open peer review, and a patient review.⁶ For research papers that are accepted, its pre-publication history (including previous versions of the paper, peer

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review comments and report of the editorial meeting with editor's and statistician's comments) is published alongside the paper.⁷

It is also important not to forget the need to create critical mass that can foster the development of medical journals in Portugal. Although there are excellent editorial teams working in several medical journals in Portugal, there is lack of formal training programs in medical editing which currently only exist in a handful of mostly English-speaking countries and are usually restricted to clinicians working there.

There is thus potential for medical journals in Portugal, possibly in partnership with academic institutions, to

develop fellowship-like formal training programs in medical editing, especially now that core competencies of the role have recently been established.⁸ One of the ideas behind having a student section and a student team at Acta Médica Portuguesa is precisely to help breed the next generation of clinicians with expertise in medical editing.⁹

I prefer to think that in a country like Portugal we should invest time and effort in developing good quality medical journals that uphold the highest editorial standards rather than aiming to develop top medical journals, which have unparalleled resources. We can also make up for our small scale and limited resources with creative and out-of-the-box solutions to our daily challenges.

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