

Eat Coat, Eat! Writing style and Indian Dermatology journals – Time to rethink?

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Once upon a time, a famous and well-known scientist was invited to a wedding ceremony. He went there in simple attire but as he tried to enter the hall where the ceremony was being held, he was mistaken for a beggar, insulted and prevented from entering. The scientist, however, was not thwarted - he went home, changed his attire to a lavish business suit and went to the ceremony again. He was received with a warm welcome! Then, to everyone's surprise, he began stuffing food items into his coat pockets. When asked why, his reasoning was that since he was refused entrance when he was dressed simply, and welcomed only when he was dressed in a high-end attire, the real honour belonged to his dress and not to himself, which was why he was feeding his coat fondly!

A similar situation probably prevails in many dermatology journals across the world, particularly those being published in India. Undue emphasis is sometimes given to writing style, grammar and English usage, with the scientific merit of the article often relegated to second place. This is really unfortunate, since brilliant research work is frequently done by dermatologists whose mother tongue is not English, and consequently written in average or incorrect English. Their writing style might not match those of the more fortunate native speakers of English. Their research work, sadly, is frequently rejected by many Indian journals simply on the ground of being poorly written or having many grammatical mistakes.

While no formal studies have been done on this subject, it is possible that with the introduction of MBBS courses in Hindi and other Indian languages, the problem could escalate.¹

Most Indian medical colleges do not offer a dedicated training course on writing skills for scientific journals, as a result of which, most young researchers do not have any idea of how to express themselves concisely, or to prepare a manuscript whose writing style matches those of western authors. Many European and North American journals require English language editing for manuscripts before a peer review process, to prevent rejection based on poor English usage. Indian dermatology journals do not usually offer such services. In this regard, mention needs to be made of the Indian Journal of dermatology, venereology and leprology which stands out among the Indian journals in possessing a content review team whose role is to check writing style, grammar and correct usage of words after peer review is completed. This is done free of cost but only after the article is accepted. As a potential solution to the problem of poor writing, many paid writing services have recently been launched, such as Grammarly, Ref-n-write, SciFlow and EndNote which are easily accessible and charge nominal fees for their services.² They offer an easy and in-hand solution to the problem of poor writing, which can sometimes aid in the final acceptance of a manuscript.

If Indian dermatology journals intend to maintain an essentially 'Indian' character, it ought to offer such services which would improve writing style and grammatical errors. Merely rejecting a manuscript based on writing style and usage of grammar does not befit a scientific discipline. It is noteworthy that dermatology is a scientific discipline and not a branch of English literature. Hence writing style, grammatical errors, errors of capitalization etc, should be secondary and not primary considerations in deciding the merit of an article.² Undoubtedly, better writing skills help convey an idea

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properly, but the excessive emphasis on it to the detriment of scientific content is not warranted in any scientific journal. As an illustration, it is akin to traveling from Rishikesh to Delhi by selecting a train not by the time it takes to travel and cost considerations, but by which train offers the best food services. Similarly, judging articles on the basis of grammar, and rejecting articles that have scientific merit but are written in a poor style, is like throwing away the baby with the bath water. This is not to say that we should endorse poor or grammatically incorrect English, or condone articles written in an unintelligible way; such articles should be sent back to the authors and offered English language editing services by dedicated personnel (which can be a chargeable service, depending upon the model the journal is following).

An analysis of the major causes of rejection in the major Indian journals reveals that although poor content, including flawed methodology, incorrect diagnosis and poor photographs were the leading and most frequent causes of rejection, poor intelligibility ranked as the seventh most common cause, accounting for around 10% of rejections.³ This indicates that while poor content remains the leading cause of rejection, poor writing does indeed contribute to a small fraction of rejections. Many Indian dermatology journals do receive works that are written in reasonably good English yet contain lots of typographic errors which portrays laziness and unprofessionalism on the part of the authors. Such

submissions showcase the shoddy work of the authors since these authors have the requisite skills in English but, out of carelessness or otherwise, do not bother to correct these silly mistakes. Undoubtedly, such submissions should be sent back to the authors. Overall, the scientific merit of submitted articles should be the priority in deciding which articles deserve publication.³ That, and that alone, should be the sole criteria in deciding the merit of a scientific article!

Declaration of patient consent

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