

Introduction to the special issue on publishing in public health journals

The secret to success as a scientist is comprised in three words—work, finish, publish.

—Michael Faraday, English chemist and physicist [1791–1867] (1).

Why you should read this special edition

Science cannot exist without writing. Writing is the only medium of communication that allows science to have its essential characteristics: that is recorded, evaluable, public, reproducible, systematic, and cumulative. Publishing is also the final stage of research, which means that being able to do research is not enough; you need to be able to describe, explain, and publish your research. If not, your research literally doesn't exist for the scientific community. Too, evidence-based medicine is *literature*-based medicine, and the quality of the evidence depends on the quality of the medical literature. How well you document and interpret your research is thus critical to advancing medicine and public health. Finally, preparing your article for publication is usually the shortest and least expensive stage in the research process, and it is also among the most important. Once your paper has been published, it will be in the literature forever—with your name on it (2). So, if you are a researcher, developing strong medical-technical writing and editing skills is not only a good idea, it benefits you and everyone who is interested in, or affected by, your research.

Unfortunately, although most physicians and public health workers learn to write in their native language and often in English as a foreign language, few are taught the medical-technical writing skills needed to prepare high-quality scientific articles. Although many authors throughout the world can get help with searching the literature, designing a study, conducting research, analyzing data, and interpreting results, most are expected to write their own articles with a minimum of help from professional medical writer-editors. This issue of the journal was developed with that fact in mind. Here, my colleagues and I provide our best advice in preparing articles reporting public health, epidemiological, and clinical research for publication in peer reviewed journals.

What you will learn in this special edition

If there were secrets to getting published (there aren't), they would probably be (I) ask a new and important question; (II) answer it well with a high-quality study; (III) clearly and adequately explain and document your research in a well written manuscript; and (IV) follow the journal's instructions for authors when you submit your manuscript for publication. In this issue of the journal, my colleagues and I suggest ways to improve secrets 3 and 4.

In the first article in the issue, *Writing a better research article*, I review the purpose and form of each part of the article. I suggest several useful techniques to improve various aspects of the article. My advice comes from more than 40 years as a medical writer-editor and educator, many of those as Manager of Medical Editing Services at the Cleveland Clinic, at the New England Evidence-based Practice and Cochrane Centers, and as an adjunct instructor at the University of Chicago.

In the second article, *Ethical treatment of participants in public health research*, Ghada Al Tajir, PhD, discusses the most important ethical issues in conducting public health research, including informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, and research ethics committees/institutional review boards. Dr. Al Tajir founded Timeline Research Solutions, which specializes in research consulting and training. For more than 20 years, she worked at the Ministry of Health in the United Arab Emirates and is an adjunct clinical assistant professor at the University of Sharjah in the UAE.

The third article, *Reporting the methods used in public health research and practice*, J. Donna Stroup, PhD, MSc, and her colleagues review the requirements for reporting research methods in public health, including outbreak investigations, public health surveillance programs, prevention and intervention program evaluations, surveys, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses. Dr. Stroup was with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for many years before

founding Data for Solutions, Inc.; C. Kay Smith, MEd, is senior Technical Writer-Editor; and Benedict Truman, MD, Consulting Editor for infectious diseases for the *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice*, is the Associate Director for Science in CDC's National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention.

In the fourth article, *How to report the results of public health research*, Farrokh Habibzadeh, MD, describes how to report P values, 95% confidence intervals, measures of risk, and the performance characteristics of diagnostic tests and receiver operating characteristics curves. Dr. Habibzadeh is a Past President of the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME; an organization of the editors-in-chief of medical journals around the world), an Editorial Consultant for *The Lancet*, and the Editor and Founder of *The International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*.

In the fifth article, *Preparing better tables*, Liu Wei, MD, MPH, describes the importance of tables in reporting data. She reviews the parts of a table, how to format each part, ways to organize the rows and columns, and several common problems with tables. Dr. Liu is a Senior Science Editor of the *Chinese Journal of Cancer*, an English language journal. Trained as a physician, she is also a bioethicist, a graduate of the Medical Writing and Editing Training Program sponsored by the China Medical Board, and received systematic editorial training at several academic institutions in the US.

In the sixth article, *Preparing better graphs*, Laura King, MA, MFA, describes the uses and components of graphs and discusses the general considerations in their preparation. She tells how to prepare several specific kinds of graphs and how to avoid the most common problems in graphs. Ms. King, formerly with *JAMA*, is a freelance medical writer who has been an adjunct instructor at the University of Chicago's Medical Writing and Editing Certificate program for many years.

Finally, in the seventh and last article, *Choosing and communicating with journals*, I briefly describe medical journals and how they are published, funded, and evaluated. I advise authors how to choose a journal for their manuscripts and guide them through the submittal and publication processes, including how to communicate with the editor and peer reviewers.

It has been our pleasure to share our expertise in scientific publishing with you. We hope you find the information useful, both in evaluating the research you read and in publishing the research you conduct.

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