

Editorial

The MMJ-MMSG: a call to referees and authors

Simon Attard Montalto

The Malta Medical Journals, now comprising the Malta Medical Journal (MMJ) and the Malta Medical School Gazette (MMSG), remain the only strictly peer-reviewed journals that focus on medicine and medical issues in Malta. They offer local clinicians and colleagues the option to publish their research with reasonable odds in favour of acceptance, when compared with large international journals where the number of submitted manuscripts and refusal to publish are considerably greater. Admittedly, a publication in the MMJ-MMSG will reach a much smaller audience since, despite all the commendable efforts of the outgoing editor, Prof Victor Grech, the MMJ remains outside of PubMed and PubMed Central. Essentially, a substantial captive local population and, more importantly, a steady influx of high quality publications is a pre-requisite for acceptance onto PubMed and PubMed Central.¹ Little can be done about the former and, although the MMJ-MMSG do receive and publish quality work, this could be improved.

There is little doubt that significantly more quality publications are 'out there' – one only has to review the quality and wide-ranging research that is presented by disparate departments and several authors in fora such as the Malta Medical School Conferences (MMSC). Unfortunately, many local researchers appear to be satisfied with their work achieving the level of an oral or poster publication at conference, and do not follow this up with a formal, academically 'superior' publication.

Cover Picture:

'Valletta Skyline' (2019)

India Ink on paper

By Ben Chetcuti

Dr Ben Chetcuti is a Maltese artist, currently completing psychiatry training in Glasgow. His artistic journey started in digital illustration during his time at medical school at the University of Malta. Since moving to Glasgow, Ben has become passionate about ink illustration and painting and now uses the medium to portray the nostalgic colours of the Maltese Islands

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By rights, during the subsequent six months following a MMSC, one would expect the editorial board of the MMJ-MMSG to be inundated with submissions, yet this simply does not happen. This is a shame as, ultimately, prestige and longevity in one's research is garnered through a publication and not via a one-off presentation.

It is now pretty routine during many medical job interviews, to award credit for publications and, along the same lines, attainment of additional postgraduate degrees. These, by definition, involve some form of research and should, by default, generate material that is 'publishable'. Admittedly, the 'cream' is preferably sent to highly-cited journals, especially in the first instance. But surely (and we have all been there), this work is not always (usually doesn't!) accepted by the *Lancet*, *NJEM* or *Nature Genetics*, etc., and there is always valid data and results, sometimes 'spin-offs' from the core research, that would be eminently acceptable to the MMJ-MMSG. A gentle *caveat* in this regard: research and publications are important and do procure 'brownie points' at interview, but this should not be seen as a means to an end, and research should always be conducted properly, organised along accepted standards and contribute to knowledge. 'Research' simply with the aim of generating a publication, regardless of quality, is unacceptable, and will not skirt any hurdle supported by a peer-

review process, including that of the MMJ-MMSG.

In case you are still in doubt, the MMJ-MMSG continues to welcome submissions of good quality research and papers. All those involved, in some form or another, in work relating to publications will know that this is a laborious and time-consuming exercise. This is not helped when manuscripts are submitted in sub-optimal or an incomplete state, or not in accordance with 'Instructions to Authors' and, as a minimum, will result in delays in publication if not an outright rejection of the article. ALL submitting authors MUST read and ADHERE to ALL the Instructions to Authors. Although it would seem 'obvious' that articles should be formatted as instructed, and the text, grammar, figures, tables, data, etc., are all double-checked, non-compliance in this regard remains a common problem. Indeed, the lead/senior author should ensure that all of the above has been completed before submission, particularly when manuscripts have been written by more junior and less experienced colleagues.

All submitted articles undergo editorial review and all, apart from guest editorials, are sent to expert referees for further review. The role of the referees cannot be understated: the entire peer-review process is propped up by these individuals who are generally busy people who undertake this lengthy process (a good review will take time, almost always no less than 30 minutes and, on occasion, several hours), for

no remuneration (although every three reviews will entitle referees employed by the Division of Health, Malta, to claim a merit award). Article reviews should, ideally, be returned within a period of six weeks, preferably using the Journal on-line portal. On the other hand, significant delays will hold up the manuscript and, if multiplied by several delayed articles, will delay the publication of the entire issue. Hence, as with other journals, referees are asked to declare whether they can complete in time and the editorial board would prefer a clear 'no' from the outset so that the manuscript in question can be passed on to a second referee. Problems trawling and maintaining quality refereeing is not unique to the MMJ-MMSG,² but is essential in ensuring 'a standard' as well as timely publication. On an international basis, this aspect of academic publication is reliant on collegiate support, no reward and little, if any, guidance, although some larger institutions do provide training.^{3,4} Malta is no different and the MMJ-MMSG remains hugely dependant on good will of colleagues who offer their time and expertise 'gratis'.

The MMJ has come a long way from its origins as the St Luke's hospital based gazette in the 1980s. It is probably the oldest peer-reviewed journal in Malta that has been published, initially in paper format till 2014 and, like many

other journals,⁵ on-line since. It remains one of the key pillars that defines the Malta Medical School. The list of individuals who, in one way or another, have supported the MMJ/MMJ-MMSG is extensive, and I will not attempt to list these, given the inevitable risk of omission(s). The ultimate quality in the published product is the result of a multi-faceted effort, and is dependent on quality submissions, timely and in-depth manuscript review, and a dedicated and efficient production team. The latter incorporates a MMSJ-MMSG Board, editorial and secretarial team with most of the work being carried out at secretarial level. The Journals enjoy the continuing support from the Medical School: we expect Lecturers and members of the Faculty Board to contribute, particularly with accepting to referee submitted articles (greater support is required in this regard), and we continue to welcome quality submissions, both locally and from overseas.

Sub-note: Given the relevance to both, this editorial has been published in both the MMJ and MMSG.

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