Publish and Perish

Having published hundreds of articles on CAM and other subjects in medical journals, surely I must have made every possible mistake. Here is a very brief and highly personal account which explains how to avoid at least some of them.

Before you start drafting your article, ensure you know what you want to achieve. Is your article going to be a comment, a review or a report of some original research data? What messages do you want to convey? Which audience are you addressing? In which journal do you want to publish?

Once you are clear about these issues, create a clear structure. Review articles and original research communications have to adhere (more or less) to a prescribed structure: introduction, methods, results, discussion. But you still need to order your flow of thought. Within each of the above headings, you have to develop a sequence of arguments, and it is obviously best if they are logically structured. So take some time to think about what precisely you want to say and write down an outline of issues you want to cover. Once you see this on paper you will soon detect inconsistencies, repetitions and other errors. Correcting these at such an early stage will enable you to generate a solid concept.

When you have dealt with all of these aspects, take some (uninterrupted) time to produce a first draft of (all or part of) your paper. Where applicable, use your research protocol as a guide. Consider your audience – it's silly, for instance, to explain to cardiologists in the introduction of an article on the cholesterol-lowering properties of garlic that coronary heart disease kills many patients or that it is caused by atherosclerosis which, in turn, is aggravated by high cholesterol levels. On the other hand, if you write for a lay readership, this may well be the best way of leading people to your subject. Always be concise and avoid repetitious or superfluous detail.

Within limits, you can choose your writing style. Try to ensure that there is a clear distinction between fact and (your) opinion. The topic of your article largely determines its style. An

editorial comment can be colourful and personal. A research paper usually shouldn't have these qualities, but equally it doesn't have to be dry. Remember that strongly worded unfounded beliefs are not what editors normally want to publish. Ensure a friend or colleague independently reads your manuscript and gives you a frank opinion.

Having written a first draft, leave it for a while. In my experience, it is most helpful to set it aside for between 1 and 2 weeks. Subsequently reread the whole article. You will quickly find passages that need rewriting. Work hard and revise the text until you are satisfied. Repeat this sequence several times. Only stop when you feel that nothing needs to be changed.

Your work is probably now ready for submission to the journal of your choice. Almost certainly, the editor will send it out for peer review – where 1 to 3 experts critically read and comment upon your article. In turn, these comments are returned to you and often you will be asked to revise the article. Peer review can be a most sobering process. Firstly it is often very slow – once you have submitted your article you obviously want to see it in print as soon as possible. Yet at this stage, patience is required. Secondly, the comments are almost by definition critical and you might even think that they are unjustifiably negative. Think twice before rejecting these comments. Usually the reviewers have a valid point; so try to take on board as many of their comments as you can.

The peer-review process usually means you have to substantially rewrite your article. It also might involve conducting more research or doing more background reading. Similarly, you might have to entirely abandon certain elements of your paper. This may be tough, nevertheless try to do it – usually the result is a sounder paper which makes a more significant contribution to the medical literature. If nothing else, it will teach you a lot about scientific writing and improve your future work.

With a bit of luck, your paper will then be accepted and eventually published. You will feel proud and perhaps expect that it will have a strong impact. Don't be disappointed if this is not the case. Medical practice is very rarely changed by a single contribution. It tends to change gradually – independent replication of results is usually required. Rather than disappoint you, this should encourage you to produce more and better work.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember is why you are publishing in the first place. 'Publish or perish' is a well-known phrase in academia. However, the worst reason for publishing is merely to see your name in print. People who follow this principle are likely to publish and perish. One of the best reasons for publishing is to improve future health care. Bear this in mind and your article will prove worthy of publication.

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