**Focus: The price of prejudice - The world may miss out because the fruits of research in developing countries seldom make it to the pages of top journals**

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“VERY poor countries have much more to worry than doing high quality  
research. There is no science there.”

This was the opinion of Jerome Kassirer, editor-in-chief of The  
New England Journal of Medicine, in August 1995 when asked why developing countries were so poorly represented in academic journals. His views have changed little since then, though he maintains: “We’ve published from developing countries and we’ll continue to do so.” Yet less than 2 per cent of articles in The New England Journal of Medicinecome from the Third World.

Scientists from poorer or non-English speaking countries claim that  
statistics such as this prove that editors of journals are biased against their work. New evidence supporting their fears emerged in September, at a meeting in Prague of hundreds of editors of medical journals from around the world. A 20-year review of papers published in the four major American medical research journals—The New England Journal of Medicine, the Journal of the American Medical Association, the Archives of Internal  
Medicine and the Annals of Internal Medicine—shows that  
research from the US has the best chance of being published in those journals. Next comes work from other English-speaking countries. Non-English developed countries are poorly represented, and research from the Third World barely get a look in.

Timothy Fagan of the University of Arizona College of Medicine, Tucson, who carried out the review, says that although non-English speaking researchers have become better represented in medical journals, they are still being held back by  
language, unfair bias against certain countries and the perception that certain  
medical subjects are not relevant to Western readers.

Samiran Nundy, former editor of The National Medical Journal of  
India, says editors are wrong to omit science that is specific to a  
particular country or region. “How can you claim to be an international journal  
when you only want to publish home research?” he asks. His view is shared by  
many editors in developed countries. Richard Smith, editor of the British  
Medical Journal, told the conference in Prague: “One of the biggest gripes  
I have as someone who sits on 30 editorial boards is that something can be  
discovered in Europe, and ten years later it’s rediscovered in the US. How can  
we educate American editors to learn and respect medical achievements from  
other countries?”

Publish and be damned

American journals’ reputation for parochialism is backed by another study  
from the American Gastroenterology Association. The association reviewed all the  
papers submitted to its journal Gastroenterology in 1995 and 1996. It  
found that the acceptance rate for papers from the US was 12 per cent higher  
than for papers from elsewhere. Anne Link, who led the study, even claims that  
“American bias against papers is very much stronger than this study suggests”.  
Although the association did not work out an acceptance rate for papers from the  
Third World, it agrees that it would have been lower still.

Researchers in developing countries can submit their research to domestic  
journals, but the elite science publication databases that researchers around  
the world refer to when checking—and citing—the latest work in their  
fields include very few of these journals. The best known databases, such as Medline and the Science Citation Index, list articles from around 3000  
journals—less than 1 in 20 of the world’s research publications—and  
only 2 per cent of these are from the developing world. As experts point out, this is hardly enough to account for the scientific output of 80 per cent of the world’s people.

Boutros Mansourian, director of research policy at the WHO in Geneva, points  
out that although the developing world has the greater population, it holds only  
10 to 20 per cent of the world’s human and material scientific resources. But  
even this does not justify such a small representation on the databases. The  
result is that many researchers from poorer countries take a gamble and submit  
their work to prestige titles where they will be noticed if published. Most are  
rejected.

Nundy and others admit that publications in developing countries are often of  
poor quality in terms of editing and peer review. “Only 8 of the 75 Indian  
medical journals are of international quality,” he says. Any high quality work tends to be creamed off by the best national journals, or even the international ones. The irony is that scientists who publish excellent work in journals such as The Lancet or The New England Journal of Medicine  
could be making their results unavailable to their compatriots. Few universities and research institutes can afford them. This is especially unfortunate when the research is relevant to medicine in that part of the world.

The lack of access in poor countries to heavyweight journals is a huge  
problem for doctors and researchers. Alex Tindimubona, chairman of the African  
Science and Technology Exchange, an organisation that promotes research  
throughout Africa, says the answer is for medical editors in the developing  
world to “make their own journals excellent”. But this suggestion invites  
patronising derision from certain editors of Western journals, one of whom told  
Ballenas: “Food and clean drinking water are more important than  
having good peer-reviewed journals. Priorities are getting a little mixed  
up.”

Global medicine

Another idea is for a “world” journal that is truly international. Such a  
publication is necessary, say some editors, because important research ,  
for example, TB or malaria might be as relevant to community doctors in New York  
or Indonesia as to the scientists in Africa who did the study.

Third World editors insist that medical research from developing countries is  
good enough to be considered for top journals. “Many of the PhDs in developing  
countries trained in the West,” says Tindimubona. “For example, I did my PhD in  
Canada. And yes, research done in Africa can be of global  
importance—vaccine research in AIDS is an obvious example. Resources in  
Africa are of global interest. There may be problems, such as malaria, that are  
concentrated in Africa but may be of global significance. It’s a world challenge  
to develop Third World research.”

Western editors support this view. Richard Horton, editor of The  
Lancet, wrote in Scientific American two years ago: “One of the  
reasons why infectious diseases such as ebola virus are emerging is that  
economic changes in developing countries are bringing humans into with  
previously isolated ecosystems. The only way to understand that process and its  
effects is to publish word from local researchers.” About 8 per cent of research  
published in The Lancet comes from developing countries—four  
times as much as its rival, The New England Journal of Medicine.

Meanwhile, Kassirer believes that the Internet could help to bridge the gap  
between Western and Third World science by increasing access to research from  
all over the world. But only 1 in 10 medical libraries in developing countries  
has a computer, and the Internet will not solve the problem that important  
pieces of research from “minor” countries are being passed over by major  
journals.

As some researchers suggest, it may take the rueful discovery of missed  
medical opportunities before the West sits up and takes proper notice of science  
in the developing world.

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**Editorial : It's not what you know - If there are biases in scientific publication editors must take the blame**

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IT IS a common complaint of scientists in developing nations that they  
cannot get their research published in well-known Western journals. Editors and  
reviewers regard their work with suspicion and its quality has to be better than  
equivalent work from a Western laboratory before it is seen to be equal.

Their complaints may well be true but if they are, then researchers from the  
poorer nations can take comfort in knowing they are not alone in being  
discriminated against. Data presented at a recent meeting in Prague showed that  
several top American journals prefer to publish American research rather than  
research from Britain or non-English speaking Europe  
[(see p 22)](https://ballenas.info/article/mg15621063-000-focus-the-price-of-prejudice-the-world-may-miss-out-because-the-fruits-of-research-in-developing-countries-seldom-make-it-to-the-pages-of-top-journals).

Similar research on the biases of journals from other nations has not yet  
been done. But we can guess at the likely result from a study of citation  
patterns presented at the same conference by Simon Wessely from King’s College  
School of Medicine in London. British researchers tend to cite the work of their  
British colleagues just as US authors tend to cite their US colleagues.

So who is to blame for this prejudice and what can be done it?

The finger is normally pointed at reviewers of papers. Overly-enthusiastic  
reviews are given to work from friends, friends of friends, and people whose  
work is already familiar from conferences. More negative reviews go to  
researchers with unfamiliar names from far-off lands. And so well-meaning  
journal editors are misled by their review panels into publishing research by closed circle.

This is a convenient view for journal editors to take but one that is not  
well supported by the evidence. Over the past decade, there have been several studies into the effect of concealing the identity of a paper’s authors from its reviewers. Three such “blinding” studies were described at the Prague conference. Although differing in details, the general conclusion was that the quality of a review is not greatly affected by blinding.

But if reviewers are open-minded then where does prejudice start to creep in? It is all too likely to be in the editor’s room when final decisions on  
publication are made. Unfortunately for editors, the great majority of  
reviews—unbiased though they may be—are also exceedingly woolly and  
full of contradictory advice. Once the exceptionally good papers have been  
accepted and the exceptionally bad rejected, then a great mess of things in the middle is left. It is at this stage that a paper from Harvard can seem a sounder bet to a harassed editor than one from Hyderabad.

The best antidote to such sloppiness is for journal editors to keep  
statistics on the success rates of the papers that are submitted to them from different countries and different institutions. The goal is not to keep them all equal but to have data which will alert them to the possibility that bias is creeping in.

Scientists from the developing world should reasonably expect some positive discrimination, or, at least, some understanding when their papers fall down only in the standard of English or the quality of  
presentation—sophisticated computers with multiple fonts are not available  
everywhere. But, at the same time, those scientists should also appreciate that there is a lot they can do for themselves.

High standards for scientific publication need to be learnt at home.  
Unfortunately, all too many journals from the developing world do not enforce peer review. It can be more important to know a member of the editorial board than to be an excellent scientist. To be fair, open peer review can be very difficult in poor countries where the size of the scientific community is small. When everyone knows everyone else, critical words can be taken very personally.

One way forward is for journals in the developing nations to bring in foreign reviewers alongside local ones to make the process more objective. Journals that have made the decision to push for a really critical review  
process and add foreigners to their editorial boards have often been triply  
rewarded: the quality of the work improves, the number of citations rise and their network of colleagues in other nations expands. In an imperfect world where s count for so much, it is better to join  
in than to stand outside and wait for change.

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