

Summary report on the

Expanded meeting of the Editorial Board of the Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal

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Cairo, Egypt
6–7 June 2015



**World Health
Organization**

Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

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1. Introduction

The Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal (EMHJ) is in its 21st year and since 2013, under the direction of Dr Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean and Editor-in-Chief, changes have been made to enhance EMHJ's quality and public health relevance. For example, the Editorial Board and International Advisory Panel have been re-formed, an online submission and peer-review system introduced, more rigorous criteria applied for acceptance in terms of quality and public health relevance, the backlog of papers significantly reduced, and new sections added. However, not all the proposed changes have been implemented and improving and developing the Journal is an ongoing process. There is a need to identify challenges still facing the Journal, ensure that changes are implemented and consider ways to further develop the Journal.

The production of EMHJ involves input and support from many players who undertake important but different roles. Therefore it was decided to extend the Editorial Board meeting to involve others who contribute to the publication of EMHJ in various capacities in order to bring a wider perspective to addressing the challenges and solutions for EMHJ. An expanded Editorial Board meeting was therefore held on 6–7 June 2015 in the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, Cairo, Egypt.

The participants included Editorial Board members, selected members of the EMHJ International Advisory Panel, reviewers and authors of the Journal, experts on publication ethics, other editors of WHO journals, and in-house lead persons from the Regional Office.

The objectives of the meeting were to: review EMHJ achievements and challenges faced in 20 years (1995–2014); review and endorse draft publication ethics guidelines against which submissions can be

evaluated and necessary action taken; and propose actions to improve the quality of articles at submission and throughout the review process. The meeting was chaired by Professor Mahmoud Fathalla (Egypt) and Mrs Fiona Curlet, Editor, EMHJ, was Rapporteur.

A closed session with EMHJ Editorial Board was also held to: review actions taken since the second Editorial Board meeting (6 March 2014); and propose future directions for the Journal, ideas for improvements in content and quality, as well as themes and important topics which reflect concurrent public health and social conditions in the Region.

Dr Alwan, in his opening remarks, highlighted his vision to see EMHJ as the leading public health journal in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. He noted that EMHJ was an opportune vehicle to disseminate public health research and information and raise awareness of the important public health issues in the Region among regional public health professionals, including policy-makers. Thus it was important to ensure that it fulfilled this mission. Dr Alwan expressed his appreciation of the support of the Editorial Board, the Advisory Panel and others including Dr Haytham Khayat, who had contributed to developing EMHJ. While some progress had been made in the past three years, not all the recommendations of the Board had been implemented and it was important to find practical solutions to the challenges. He looked forward to frank discussion and concrete actions to continue to develop and raise the profile of EMHJ in years to come.

Over the two days of the meeting, presentations were made on a range of strategic issues regarding the Journal. A panel discussion on improving the relevance, quality and reach of EMHJ was moderated by the Director, Health System Development, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, who outlined the main challenges which face the EMHJ and suggested solutions. Comments were

provided on the draft Guidelines on Ethical Conduct and Publication of Health Research by participants and by other invitees who were unable to attend the meeting in person.

2. Summary of discussions

There is a need to be clear on EMHJ's purpose and audience. Is it just to publish research; identify issues of sciences and research in the Region; disseminate public health initiatives and WHO policies/strategies? Is it for authors, readers, policy-makers? With EMHJ scheduled to have an impact factor in 2016, should the Journal be more concerned about its impact on public health practice and policy in the region than impact factor?

The quality of papers submitted to EMHJ and the general low quality of research in the Region was an acknowledged problem which needs to be addressed through education, starting at the university undergraduate level, and through systematic capacity building in conducting and reporting research. Ad hoc occasional training will have little impact.

EMHJ should guide the research agenda focusing on the five strategic priorities of WHO's work in the Region, where research is needed to promote global strategies by commissioning papers and publishing theme issues. Invited reviews and reports on appropriate strategic meetings should continue. Systematic reviews should be encouraged over narrative reviews. The content could be expanded to include sections on: news/interviews with key individuals; news from WHO; summary of papers in an issue (directed at policy-makers).

It was noted that the Journal is still not widely known among many researchers in some countries of the Region including Saudi Arabia and Lebanon. There are now many more journals competing for papers regionally and internationally, e.g. the Islamic Republic of Iran

has 66 journals indexed in the International Scientific Indexing service, so authors have many more options to publish. It is important that EMHJ is widely known in the Region and beyond so as to attract more and better papers and also to disseminate research and public health information extensively to public health professionals.

EMHJ should develop an advocacy/dissemination plan to promote the EMHJ brand, make use of social media/blogs and actively interact with researchers/authors to identify why the research is poor, on what basis authors select a journal to submit to; why top researchers in the Region (e.g. some Board and Advisory Panel members) do not submit to EMHJ. It should aim to be the hub of the public health community in the Region.

It was proposed that since the great majority of submissions are in English (95% in 2014), EMHJ should only publish articles in English with abstracts in all three languages. However, it was noted that in Syria, Arabic is the teaching language and also Arabic may be preferred by policy-makers. Additionally as a regional journal in a Region where Arabic is spoken in most of the countries, not to have Arabic would send out the wrong message. It was also necessary to consider disseminating information in other regional languages, such as Urdu and Farsi.

In general, the draft EMHJ Guidelines on Ethical Conduct and Publication of Health Research were considered comprehensive but certain issues were raised.

The cultural relevance of ethical standards needs to be considered. For example, in our Region, written informed consent may be difficult to obtain given levels of literacy in some areas; autonomy is an issue as husbands and families are often involved in health decision-making for a wife/family member; and not all institutions or ministries of health have institutional review boards (IRBs).

It is not clear if misconduct/unsatisfactory behaviour is deliberate or from ignorance. Education is needed and should be part of the medical curriculum at the start. Reviewers and editors may also need training about ethical issues. Competing interests should also be considered for reviewers and editors and are not just financial but also academic and cultural. It should be made clear that competing interests do not preclude acceptance and publication so as to encourage transparency.

The question of ensuring ethical standards are applied needs to be considered. How should EMHJ verify if IRB clearance and informed consent were obtained, and what the quality of the IRB itself is?

The resources of EMHJ need to be reviewed to ensure adequate capacity to implement the recommended actions to improve the Journal.

3. Recommended actions

1. Revise the purpose and mission of EMHJ to strike a balance between publishing research papers and other public health information.
2. Content
 - a. Develop a list of topics and authors for invited reviews in light of previous reviews.
 - b. Re-issue and expand the call for papers.
 - c. Oblige researchers funded by WHO/EMRO to submit a paper from their research to EMHJ.
 - d. Consider asking well regarded journals to direct papers to EMHJ.
 - e. Highlight papers with policy implications within each issue.
 - f. Work with Arabic-speaking policy-makers on developing policy briefs.

3. Theme issues
 - a. Publish themes with guest editors on: civil registration and vital statistics; emergency preparedness and response; MDGs; antimicrobial resistance; MERS.
 - b. Provide definitions and requirements for a theme issue and a supplement.
4. Quality
 - a. Develop an advocacy plan to attract better submissions.
 - b. Conduct capacity-building in research reporting to enhance the quality of submitted papers.
 - c. Link up with EQUATOR, COPE, COCHRANE and publishers such as Biomed Central and Elsevier, who can offer training, to explore training options.
5. Dissemination and advocacy
 - a. Develop a strategy to brand and promote EMHJ and its strengths.
 - b. Survey policy-makers on their knowledge and use of EMHJ, and actively engage with researchers, reviewers, and Board and Panel members to promote EMHJ.
 - c. Supplement the electronic mailing list with researchers, public health professionals and institutions beyond the Region.
 - d. Update the EMHJ flier.
 - e. Display and distribute EMHJ issues/flier at key conferences and meetings within and outside the Region.
 - f. Post important current news on the EMHJ webpage.
6. Reviewers
 - a. Develop guidelines for reviewers to explain what EMHJ expects from a review.
 - b. Target young researchers as reviewers and provide training to develop their capacity as reviewer.

7. Bioethics

- a. Revise and resubmit to the Editorial Board the EMHJ Guidelines on Ethical Conduct and Publication of Health Research. The revisions should consider the issues raised and follow international standards.
 - b. Develop training in bioethics combined with other training issues (package).
8. Expand the Editorial Board and International Advisory Panel membership; Board members to propose names, some with expertise in regional strategic priority areas
9. Review the EMHJ resources (personnel, logistics, etc.) to ensure adequate capacity to implement the recommended actions.



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