

From the Editor-in-Chief

Filling the gap: restoring EMHJ's public health identity

The *Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal*, EMHJ, is 20 years old this year. What started with a few submissions and two issues in 1995 has become a monthly publication with over 700 submissions a year. From the outset EMHJ's stated aims emphasized a public health scope. However, at a time when there were few health/medical journals in the Region and limited publication opportunity for researchers in the Region, EMHJ sought to encourage all health research and provide a venue for researchers to publish their work. This EMHJ successfully did but in the process the Journal's public health voice was muted with many of the papers published of limited public health or wide regional relevance.

Twenty years later, the landscape of publications in the Region has completely changed, necessitating a refocus of EMHJ on its original mission. From 17 health and biomedical journals indexed in the Index Medicus of the Eastern Mediterranean Region (IMEMR) there are now over 520 published in 20 countries of the Region, offering researchers greater opportunity for publication in many different fields.

What is still lacking however is a journal that represents the regional voice for public health and which offers a platform dedicated to raising the profile of public health in the Region.

The need for such a platform is evident: public health research and information are vital to provide evidence to inform the development of public health policies and programmes, to keep public health professionals abreast of new policies and initiatives in public health, and to allow the exchange of ideas and concepts in public health. While the Region is quite diverse, there are many commonalities and existing commitments to common action making it expedient to focus on promoting and disseminating public health research and knowledge across the Region, and indeed beyond.

EMHJ, as one of the few journals in the EMR with regional and international reach, is in a position to fill the gap, a fact recognized by the new Editorial Board of EMHJ. Thus, at its first meeting in March 2013, a key recommendation of the Board was to restore the focus of EMHJ on public health.

In the past year the Journal has been more selective in what it considers for publication placing emphasis on articles that focus on public health research and practice. This approach is guided by the decision of the Regional Committee and the regional health priorities it has endorsed, namely

health systems' strengthening, maternal, reproductive and child health and nutrition, noncommunicable diseases, communicable diseases, and emergency preparedness and response. At the same time, for research to provide useful evidence, it must be sound and credible, therefore more rigorous criteria for acceptance have been applied in selection of papers for publication in EMHJ to ensure they meet acceptable standards of scientific rigor and quality.

EMHJ, like all research journals, depends on unsolicited submissions, and in order to attract good quality research we recognize that researchers need to be confident that their papers will be efficiently processed and, if accepted, speedily published and widely disseminated. To this end, we introduced an online submission and peer review system last October to streamline the workflow and have succeeded in significantly reducing the lead time from submission to publication. Moreover, the Journal's visibility is rising. All issues are available and freely accessible on the EMHJ website and visits to the site are climbing. Half of the top 10 countries accessing the EMHJ website in 2013 were from outside the Region, highlighting our international reach. EMHJ's mailing list continues to expand and email alerts are sent out to inform readers when the latest issue is published. Furthermore, EMHJ is included in numerous international and regional bibliographic databases and indexes, including Medline/PubMed, and is now covered in the Thomson Reuters Web of Science. By 2016, EMHJ will have an impact factor, undoubtedly an important consideration in a researcher's decision to publish in a given journal.

While research papers are our lifeline, equally important is our role to raise awareness of and keep public health professionals informed about important public health issues and initiatives, especially in relation to the Region. We have therefore extended the content of EMHJ to include invited editorials and reviews, and summary reports of important EMRO meetings with other sections under consideration, such as policy briefs, and perspectives and brief communications for policy-makers and public health practitioners to share their experiences.

EMHJ's focus is firmly back on public health. With a mission to contribute to improving health in the Region through publishing and publicising high quality public health research and information, EMHJ is the public health journal of the Region.