# Journal publication in India – Crisis or opportunity?

'Scientific publishing in the Third World' by P. Balaram (*Curr. Sci.*, 1999, 76, 117–118) is most timely. The editorial addresses several important issues like whether poor countries should publish journals and if so should they be most 'relevant' ones, how to improve their quality, visibility and international impact.

Although these issues come up quite often, this discussion assumes significance at the present moment as the print-on-paper means of scholarly communication is in a turmoil throughout the world (Butler, D., *Nature*, 1999, **397**, 195–200). There is evidence now to suggest, at least in the Western world, maintaining a plethora of high-price, low-circulation journals as the primary means of scientific communication is no longer viable as these periodicals neither meet the needs of users and the overheads are economically unsustainable. Not surprisingly, many libraries in the West have threatened to withdraw subscriptions as over the decade 1986–1996 the journal costs have risen by an average of 148% compared to about 44% in consumer price index (Malakoff, D., *Science*, 1998, **282**, 853). What is more, libraries are now spending 120% more than they were in 1986 and yet get 7% fewer titles. The Association of Research Libraries in the USA comprising librarians from North America have formed Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC) to explore the possibilities of bringing out high-quality, low-priced journals in fields that are currently dominated by private publishers. Now is the time for countries like India to turn the crisis into an opportunity.

We are now in the midst of the second revolution in the scholarly communication, having fared very badly in the first one two decades ago. During the 1970s and 1980s when computer-readable databases were being developed, many journals from countries like India could not get included. As these necessitated expensive manual keying, just a handful of Third World periodicals which were of 'high quality', and 'relevance' to the largely Western clientele were included by the vendors. At that time (may be even now) many journals were badly produced, chronically delayed, had indifferent peer review practices and generally succeeded in keeping off the few good researchers from sending in their papers.

Now we are in the midst of another revolution, the era of electronic publishing and the advent of e-journals. Mercifully, web publishing has broken the barriers between the creators, users and providers of scientific information, and the monopoly of database vendors. Today there is a virtual turmoil in the scholarly communication system. And in this crisis lies an opportunity for Indian journal publishers to break free of the existing system – by setting up web sites for Indian journals to produce electronic versions and to enable users with internet access to scan these journals.

What needs to be done is to prepare the editors of Indian journals to face this new challenge – to set up properly designed e-journals fast. Many medical editors have expressed keen desire to venture into web publishing, provided necessary technical support and some financial assistance is offered, as many societies are not rich. These journals can offer free full text access, until such time as there are enough overseas sub scriptions. In fact, many leading international journals offered unlimited free access when they set-up their web versions. The government through its various S&T agencies like the DST, CSIR, ICMR can consider supporting such web publishing ventures through a one-time grant, and technical support. The dividends of the enhancing global visibility of Indian science, which in fact is one of the important reasons for the reluctance of Indian scientists to publish in our journals, should be well worth the effort. That such efforts are quite possible is evident from the fact that some medical journals run by small societies have established e-journals. One such, *Indian Paediatrics*, after enjoying considerable success in its print edition, has already established its electronic version. H. P. S. Sachdev, a paediatrician from the Maulana Azad Medical College, New Delhi, who edits the journal says that the response from abroad for his e-journal is extremely encouraging. The important reason for the success of these few journal ventures is, of course, the initiative, commitment and complete support that came from within the scientific community. Only a dedicated group of scientists can make this possible is evident by the success of the revamped *Current Science*. In medical sciences too, there are success stories. I am aware of at least two such groups of specialists – paediatricians and gastroenterologists, where full time physician-scientists have been running journals professionally. Other initiatives taken in the area of electronic publication at least in biomedical sciences also augur well for this endeavour of putting Indian research on the world map; like the setting up of the IndMed database by the Indian MEDLARS Centre of the National Informatics Centre, New Delhi. This is the first web-based Indian biomedical database which gives the titles and abstracts of about 40 journals from India which are not included in major international databases like the MEDLARS.

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