

Writing your way to recognition

The last few years have seen a progressive change in the manner in which scientific information is disseminated and consumed. While the transition from paper journals to online reading happened over a decade ago, recent trends include a rapid expansion of preprint publishing, increase the diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility of scientific communications, open data, and open access.^[1,2]

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought home a number of realizations about scientific publications. From the dearth of knowledge in early 2020 to the plethora of publications in the last 2 years, a large amount of information became widely available, but many of the scientific questions remained unanswered either due to the lack of data or lack of belief in the data.^[3]

Despite the large volumes of clinical work performed in our country, we lag behind in terms of publications and more importantly, in impactful publications.^[4] A report by the National Science Foundation of the United States notes that in 2018, the US, Europe, and China accounted for over 60% of all peer-reviewed science and engineering publications, with China outpacing all other nations.^[5] India's contribution was a little above 5% in total with a below-expected percentage of articles in the highest cited league.

These data are not surprising. Many of our colleagues are respected as skillful surgeons but not so much as researchers in the field. This probably stems from the fact that 'if it was not published, it was not done'. Recognition, particularly internationally, requires a public record of work. While soliciting nominations for speakers at meetings, while recommendations from peers certainly helps program directors frequently look up the publication record of nominees before accepting them. In a global community that is progressively shrinking, clearly, there is a need for our community to focus on writing.

This brings us to the next question-what should we be writing? For a surgical specialty, there are two distinct streams of research. The classic stream of basic and translational research requires a laboratory and skills in basic science techniques. It is not common to see surgeons engage in this themselves. While larger academic programs have the resources to develop a basic research program, this is often difficult to fund. The more common approach is

through collaboration with basic science departments. Such collaborations are extremely rewarding for both the departments and researchers since they complement each other's knowledge and skills. Basic research forms the basis for most advancements in science. However, this cannot be "publication targeted" where the sole endpoint is a paper. Such research should be aimed at answering one or more clinically related questions and may require many years of concerted effort, eventually resulting in a body of work and multiple publications.

The second and easier option is clinical research. Since seeing and operating upon patients is the *raison d'être* for all of us, data for clinical research can be easily gathered. However, where we falter is in lacking a systematic approach where the research question takes precedence. Retrospective data reporting is full of bias, compounded by "confabulation" and often does not carry even a fraction of the value that prospectively collected data does. The approach here, again, needs to be targeted to answering a specific question, or at least prospective data gathering so that there are no gaps or missing information.

The common argument that we lack time to gather data and write is probably a euphemism for the fact that we lack the ability to plan and implement research. This should not be a source of embarrassment. None of us can be good at everything. However, we need to accept our individual limitations and fill the lacunae through collaborations. Pooling data, collaborative research, and joint publications are certainly much better than no publications or poor quality publications. For those of us who work in nonacademic institutions, this may be the only way to get recognition for our efforts and skills.

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