

Promoting the Culture of Research and Publishing

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The most critical purpose for founding and publishing the *Afghanistan Journal of Public Health* (AFJPH) was to promote and sustain a culture of health research and publishing in Afghanistan. Therefore, I hope that in the years to come the journal evolves into an institution that encourages a culture of research and life-long learning, while serving to continuously improve evidence-based public health practice and policy in Afghanistan.

During the past two years I have learned that attracting high-quality submissions is one of the greatest challenges facing an editor-in-chief of a new journal. There are three main reasons.

First, there are a greater number of established international journals than ever before and competing with well-established journals for high quality manuscripts is difficult. Understandably, authors want to publish their papers in well-recognized and widely distributed journals, for both dissemination purposes and for ‘academic credit.’

Second, a new journal does not yet have an established cycle of “supply and demand.” The AFJPH is inherently short on both, given the fragile nature of our country and our scientific pool, and a very young pipeline of investigators in medicine and public health. It will take time to create a demand for locally-contextualized evidence and it will take time to build an adequate supply of locally-conducted research.

Third is the challenge of attracting good papers. In order to do so, we need to improve the process of submission, reviewing and publication. Some authors right-

fully have expressed frustration with the long period of time between submission and final publication. This stretch of time can be attributed to uncontrollable factors in the short-term, such as an inadequate number of submissions, short supply of peer reviewers, a need for several peer-review rounds for non-native English speaking authors, a lack of adequate technical infrastructure, and overall fewer resources than well-established journals. That being said, it is nonetheless an area we need to improve to meet expectations and to attract future authors.

The first issue of the AFJPH was inaugurated during the second general assembly of Afghanistan National Public Health Association (ANPHA) in Kabul, Afghanistan where the Minister of Public Health, Dr. Soraya Dalil called it a great achievement. The ceremony was of great symbolic importance in that it demonstrated the support from both the governmental and non-governmental health sector for this initiative.

Once published, the first issue of the AFJPH also received a tremendously warm welcome by both national and international readers. The editorial team has received positive feedback and constructive suggestions for improvement, some of which are reflected in this issue and some of which will be incorporated in upcoming issues. A highlight over the past year was the short editorial written by Dr. Richard Horton, the Editor-in-Chief of *The Lancet*, entitled *The Real Meaning of Innovation: “Mention the word Afghanistan and one might conjure up images of terrorism, violence, and political mayhem. Western armed forces are now approaching the end of their latest period of military intervention, leaving a precariously prepared Afghan civil society to take over full governance of a country denuded by decades of colonial wars. But this commonly pessimistic view of Afghanistan would be wrong. In 2012, the first issue of the English-language Afghanistan Journal of Public Health was published.”* (1)

There is no doubt that without the support of ANPHA’s members and its leadership the launch and continuation of the

journal would have been impossible. A great amount of credit goes to Dr. Ahmad Shah Salehi, former President of ANPHA, and Dr. Alim Atarud, current President of the Association, for their thoughtful guidance.

Through the generous support of our colleagues at the Harvard Global Health Institute (HGHI), the journal has received membership into the Committee for Publication Ethics (COPE) and received an ISSN number. Membership in the COPE is of particular importance for our new journal, and will guide us in meeting and managing ethical challenges that often accompany early submission, peer review and publication efforts.

Thanks to The Eastern Mediterranean Association of Medical Editors (EMAME) and the World Health Organization’s Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean (EMRO) the journal was registered in the database of the World Health Organization (WHO) and is indexed by the Index Medicus for the Eastern Mediterranean Region (IMEMR). These are the first few vital steps towards standardization of the journal and will make it a pioneer in publishing public health papers in Afghanistan. All of these efforts are critical to improve the efficiency of our technical operation, the quality of service to our authors, and the credibility of the journal to our readers and the scientific community.

Afghan authors are investing in the future of the AFJPH, and continue to submit manuscripts—some of which are published in this issue and some to be published in the upcoming volumes. I am proud to announce that this issue has more Afghan peer reviewers than before. We have strategically approached many Afghan public health experts to participate in the process of peer review in order to institutionalize the culture of peer review in our local academic circles. Fortunately, we have attracted several excellent reviewers such as Dr. Naqibuallah Safi of UNICEF Lesotho, Dr. Mir Jawad Ahmad Mofleh of the Eastern Mediterranean Public Health Network and Dr. Shams Rahman of the College of Public Health University of South Florida.

At the same time we have deliberately tried to expand our group of international reviewers to include experts from all walks of public health. For instance, in order to have a peer reviewer with experience in ‘border health,’ we asked Dr. Cecilia Rosales from the Mel and Enid College of Public Health (MEZCOPH) at the University of Arizona to review the article on Afghan-Tajik border health.

Similarly, we approached Saint Louis University and its public health department to review selected papers—collaboration happened through the efforts of Afghan public health alumni who have studied public health in the United States through the Fulbright Exchange program. As such, we warmly recognize the importance of contributions from Fulbright alumni in making this issue possible. Two of these alumni and members of ANPHA, Dr. Nasratullah Rasa and Dr. Mohammad Saber Perdes, facilitated the peer review process and communication with authors.

I would be remiss in not expressing my appreciation to Dr. Jeannine Greenfield, a public health professional knowledgeable about Afghanistan’s public health. During the second issue of the journal, she provided invaluable assistance, reviewing every submitted article and providing advice on all aspects of the journal’s publication.

Last but not the least, I have to thank Dr. Sue J. Goldie, Director of the Harvard Global Health Institute, who has been a genuine partner from the start, engaging intellectually and pragmatically, offering encouragement throughout, and consistently expressing confidence in our ability to accomplish our goals. Under her leadership, the HGHI community has generously shared their knowledge, helping us to build the administrative and professional capacity required for the journal’s long term success. My visit to the Institute in 2013 and meeting with the team helped the journal staff to redesign the process of planning, reviewing and publishing, from copy editing to automating the process of submission through the installation of journal management software.

After this issue, Dr. Shams Rahman will take over the responsibility of Editor-in-Chief of the journal. Dr. Shams has played an important role during the review process for this issue. His professionalism, experience in research and publication, as well as objective and critical thinking abilities, will allow the journal to continue its path to publish high-quality, original papers from Afghanistan and around the world. I am confident that Dr. Shams, under the leadership of ANPHA, and with the support of the many collaborations forged

in the last two years, will continue to improve the journal in content and structure.

In closing, I feel that my parting words as the originating Editor-in-Chief for the first two issues, resemble those of an Oscar winner who wants to use the few moments allocated for their speech to thank each and every person who had a hand in their successful journey—and yet in the end, because no words could do justice to each and every contribution, he or she simply thanks family, friends, and everyone. This journal and its success have been like an Oscar award for me and I will revere it and celebrate it for the rest of my life. Therefore, it seems only fitting that I use my final words to simply, and with the utmost sincerity, thank each and every one of you for supporting me in this endeavor.

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References

1. Horton R. Offline: The real meaning of innovation: *The Lancet*. 2013. 381:100 [Accessed November 30 2013].