Experiences of the first Indian Ombudsman

At the best of times, editorial offices and editors the world over are not considered author-friendly. This is at least partly due to the very structure and function of a large number of editorial offices. Anonymous peer review coupled with the need to reject a large percentage of papers make editors less reader-friendly in order to avoid more correspondence and spending additional time on papers that may not eventually get published. No matter how 'open' an editor is, establishing trust and gaining the confidence of authors is an arduous task. Despite such innovative steps as 'open peer review' and clear outlining of editorial policies, few editors have succeeded in establishing a rapport with all their authors. The issue is clearly two-sided. Authors (especially those who have received rejection slips) routinely accuse editors of being rude, biased, irresponsible, etc. Editors are powerful as they can 'accept' papers and thus can wield lot of clout in the peer community. Not surprisingly, few confront editors even when they are given a raw deal. The battle at the best of times is seemingly one-sided. That there is no forum for even genuine grievances is hardly comforting for even a dogged author. The fear of the swift reprisal of a vindictive editor can be very unnerving.

While there is evidence of outright editorial misconduct, it is probably not widely prevalent. But editors can and often do play havoc with the scholarly communication system. For instance, they can deliberately delay the processing of manuscripts, reject through a pliable referee, manipulate priority, and thus can wield lot of clout in the peer community. Not surprisingly, few confront editors even when they are given a raw deal. The battle at the best of times is seemingly one-sided. That there is no forum for even genuine grievances is hardly comforting for even a dogged author. The fear of the swift reprisal of a vindictive editor can be very unnerving.

Authors too can be unreasonable. While they cry foul when their article gets delayed, even if it was due to an inattentive referee, they do not mind delaying reviewing others' manuscripts. Thus there are problems from both the sides. The 1980s saw the emergence of more reported cases of editorial misconduct closely coinciding with the increasing support for research, and the starting of many learned journals to publish the burgeoning papers resulting in the (in)famous 'publish and perish' syndrome. Scientists were desperate to publish at any cost to survive and editors wanted to attract and publish the 'best' papers that would push the impact factor up to lure subscribers and advertisers, even if it meant publishing incomplete work or refusing to reconsider manuscripts once returned from the editorial office. Both these led to an increased prevalence of unethical practices in science. A British pharmacologist Andrew Herxheimer triggered off a debate by forcefully arguing for fair treatment to authors. He wrote: "Editors are well defended by their position, by their editorial boards, and publishers. An author who has been treated badly stands alone." He proposed a mechanism of yearly audit of editorial processes in journals, and more importantly that the process should be transparent. Shortly thereafter, I had argued for some kind of peer review audit in Indian medical journals but there were no takers.

Editorial accountability was truly internationalized at the International Congress on Peer Review in 1994. Altman and colleagues suggested that the International Council of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) should seriously attempt to address the complaints of authors against editors as there is an increasing concern of the abuse of the editorial office. They proposed investigation of editorial misconduct and possible procedures for allowing authors' grievances to be heard. The creation of an International Scientific Press Council was mooted, which could produce a code of conduct for editors and come out with definitions of inappropriate editorial behavior.

The Lancet made the first serious effort to address this issue of author-editor relationship and editorial accountability when it created the position of an ombudsman in 1996 "to record and, where necessary, to investigate episodes of alleged editorial maladministration when a complainant remains dissatisfied with the journal's first response to criticism." The Oxford dictionary defines an ombudsman as an official appointed by a Government to investigate and report on complaints made by citizens against public authorities. The Lancet's Ombudsman was akin to the UK Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration who had wide-ranging powers that included investigating delays in handling manuscripts and letters; editorial discourtesy; failure to follow stated editorial procedures; failure to take reasonable account of representations by authors and readers; and challenges to the publishing ethics of the journal. Significantly, complaints about core editorial decisions were kept out of the ambit of the ombudsman. Complaints could be directly sent to the ombudsman and the journal guaranteed that his reports would be published annually.

According to Horton, the overall impact of the ombuds-
man on his journal has been positive\(^6\) compelling the editorial staff to devote more attention to the editorial process. Editors tend to be more preoccupied with improving the journal’s quality, content, outreach, etc., often at the cost of the housekeeping job that involves the sensitive author-editor relationship. The Lancet could initiate setting time-limits for handling all manuscripts, introduce a fast-track publication procedure for articles and research letters, and appointed an editor with specific responsibility for the rather mundane but important aspects of the editorial process. Most importantly, the presence of an ombudsman who ruled on matters of editorial and commercial dispute added credibility to certain decisions taken by the journal. The ombudsman’s seventh report has been published recently.\(^6\)

However, journal editors are not very enthusiastic about an ombudsman, as few would relish inconvenient questions being asked and providing access to records hitherto unavailable to outsiders, a process that surely intrudes into and/or dilutes their authority.\(^1\) This is especially true for “big” journals like the NEJM, Nature or Science where the rejection rates hover around the high eighties or more. An emeritus editor of NEJM nearly ridiculed the concept of an ombudsman.\(^7\) Few high impact journals will agree for any dilution of their authority and the unfettered freedom they enjoy. The ICMJE (www.icmje.org) issued guidelines on unethical authorship practices, editor-owner relationship, etc. but ironically not on editorial misconduct, the simmering debate on this issue for over a decade. Meanwhile, another US-based editors association, the Council of Science Editors (formerly Council of Biology Editors, www.councilscienceeditors.org) came out with policy guidelines on the role of an editor in a journal, especially responsibilities of the editor towards authors, readers and reviewers; CSE also clearly outlines what are the editor’s rights.

There are issues that still need clarity.\(^8\) To whom are the editors answerable? To their employers, subscribers, readers, authors, the scientific community or to none? What is more, even when the proposal to have an ombudsman is acceptable, there are practical problems as not enough people who are conversant with publication ethics and have the willingness to serve as ombudsman. An ombudsman should be able to spare time to look at the complaints of authors and to seek details from possibly non-cooperative editorial staff.

The concept of an ombudsman in a biomedical or any scientific journal in India or elsewhere is yet to take root. The Indian Journal of Pharmacology (IJP) is perhaps the first Indian journal to do so due to a courageous editor unafraid of being under the close scrutiny of an ombudsman. More journals need to follow this lead. I have had the privilege of being the ombudsman of IJP since 2001 and my experience has been very rewarding. I was not exactly busy as there were only two complaints (See Box for details). I am thankful to the co-operative editorial office and the sporting authors who have accepted my verdict.

K. Satyanarayana
Editor, Indian Journal of Medical Research and Ombudsman, Indian Journal of Pharmacology
Indian Council of Medical Research,
Ansari Nagar, New Delhi – 110029, India.
E-mail: kanikaram_s@yahoo.com

References

The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author only and not of the Indian Council of Medical Research.

Case 1

A Letter to the Editor was submitted to the IJP criticizing a paper which was published when two of the three authors of the letter were members of the editorial team. The editor felt that this letter could be considered for publication only when these two authors who were earlier members of the editorial team dissociated themselves from the Letter. He opined that the publication of papers in the IJP is the collective responsibility of the editorial team and hence there is a conflict of interest. The issue was whether publication of papers in a journal is a collective decision of the editorial team or the responsibility of the editor alone. I had opined that members of editorial committee, who did not actually participate in the decision-making of that article, do not forego their academic freedom and are free to discuss and comment on the contents of published papers subject to the normal peer review process.

Their Letter was eventually published in the IJP.

Case 2

An author had submitted a Letter to the Editor in response to an Editorial published in the Journal which was accepted for publication. The response of the Section Editor who wrote the editorial was to be published alongside. At the time the page proofs were sent, the author objected to some editorial changes made in her letter and appealed that these editorial modifications had distorted the meaning of the Letter and that no change(s) should be made by the editors.

After careful examination, I opined that the editorial changes made were well within the prerogative of the editor. The Letter is being published now.