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## The COVID-19: Challenges for editors of biomedical journals during the public crisis

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### Abstract

The COVID19 pandemic has changed life, the way we work, live and interact. Scientific journal editors have experienced challenging work-life since the novel coronavirus was popularly known as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) responsible for the COVID19 pandemic in early 2020.<sup>1</sup>

A public crisis like COVID-19 requires faster dissemination of scientific findings unlike the usual publishing process, the biomedical journals have taken the challenge with extra effort to shorten the submission-to-publication time to on average by 49%, at times raising the concern for the quality of 'pandemic-publishing'.<sup>2</sup>

The review process of biomedical journals normally requires on average 3-4 months and from submission to publication 8-9 months, which may be expedited in the time of crisis as we have seen during the COVID-19 pandemic with a median of 3-13 days of publication time.<sup>3</sup>

Quarantine, restriction of movements, lockdowns, working from 'home-office' and sudden surge in the new submissions related to the pandemic, all posing a challenge to maintain the journal office process from submission, review to the final acceptance and publication, 'on time'.<sup>4-6</sup> Additional platforms, supplement issues on the COVID19 got further expanded with the various types of manuscripts added, e.g. on online education during the pandemic, psychosocial issues and lots of perspective viewpoints as people had suddenly more time for writing during the changes in lifestyle during the pandemic, all resulting in an increased number of submission to the medical journals. More and more authors included the buzzword COVID19 in the title to ride on the fast-wagon hoping and even pressurizing the editor/journal for expedited publication to disseminate the information on time.<sup>5,6</sup>

Scientific progress with the dissemination of research findings are the main tasks for the scientific editors, reviewers, and journals as a whole to serve the scientific community and public for any new information on COVID-19 by expediting the publication process and creation of platforms for the access of related information for easy access to the publications for readers, and researchers because if the information is delayed in the usual editorial process, the articles not published on time will be of little interest tomorrow, affecting the many revisions that have undergone for the protocol for the management of COVID-19 based on the emerging information.<sup>7</sup> The world has witnessed a change in the research and publication process but also a preference for patients with COVID-19 leading to a 'distraction-effect' for the care of other diseases and patients.<sup>8</sup>

In a short period, we have been seen retractions of publication on COVID-19, including in high-ranking biomedical journals like New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) and The Lancet, highlighting the challenges faced by the editors and reviewers to maintain oversight for the integrity of scientific literature because to minimize the public health risk due to the unreliable data, for example, from infamous 'Surgisphere'.<sup>9</sup> Rigorous peer review and scrutiny for the papers that have flaws, or lack new knowledge are only the tip of the ice-berg to control papers with flows while doing service to the public by accelerated publication processes to disseminate the COVID-19 pandemic information, unlike non-COVID-19 related publications by being lenient in the review and editorial practices to accelerate publication given the urgency during the pandemic.<sup>10,11</sup>

The concerns for the rigor of the review process while maintaining the dissemination of changing scenarios of COVID-related development has observed a median time of 20 (11-32) days for COVID-articles vs. 119 (62-182) days for others articles controls ( $P < 0.001$ ) from article receipt to online publication, and 97% of the articles had 13 (5-23) days vs. 102 (55-161) days ( $P < 0.001$ ) for acceptance time

i.e. 8 times faster publication time for COVID-19 articles.<sup>12</sup> The article "Transmission of 2019-nCoV Infection from an Asymptomatic Contact in Germany", a case report was written, edited, and evaluated in 48 h and published in NEJM by the end of January, which was found not to be an asymptomatic case because authors had not verified with the patient for her lack of symptoms subsequently reported in the editorial (NEJM Journal Watch).<sup>13</sup> Thus, a fast-track publication with expedited review requires more rigor from stakeholders for the accuracy of information because the published data from the reputable biomedical journal is used for public health decision-making.

Race to publish more and being first may be harmful as having observed in "retraction" of publication claiming that SARS-CoV-2 and the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) are alike<sup>14</sup>, and study supporting the use of hydroxychloroquine for treatment of COVID-19<sup>15</sup>, causing harms due to exaggerated often non-evidence-based information on fatality, community spread leading to extreme measures of lock-down and economic-social disruption, denial of science, that COVID-19 is once-in-a-century pandemic and unscientific politicization that might have caused unprecedented loss of life in the most advanced and resourceful country in the world, the USA.<sup>16</sup> The 'infodemic' and irresponsible media have generated curiosity, uncertainty, and horror! The term COVID-19 shows about 4,690,000,000 results within 0.70 seconds.<sup>17</sup> The work of biomedical journals in the scientific community response to the pandemic show a surge of publication of 125,000 COVID-19 related articles (including 30,000 on preprint servers) in 10 months of the first confirmed case.<sup>18</sup>

Biomedical journals have managed the accelerated publication processes, nearly twice as fast for COVID-19 related articles since the outbreak, and at the same time maintaining the normal publishing process for non-COVID-19 related articles. Some of the prominent medical journals (British Medical Journal, The Lancet, the Journal of the

American Medical Association, and the New England Journal of Medicine) total number of articles published before pandemic during 2019 and after pandemic in 2020 do not show an increase in the total number of publications, even with faster publication process for COVID-19 articles, which may reflect that other contents were put on hold.<sup>2,19</sup>

The JPAHS- Journal of Patan Academy of Health Sciences (<http://pahs.edu.np/>) is a peer-reviewed biomedical journal published by Patan Academy of Health Sciences, Nepal, has played an important role in disseminating the scientific information related to COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020. The JPAHS has put extra effort in the processing of COVID-19 related manuscript for timely publication which has covered a total of 51 articles (41.8% of 122 articles) covering 384pages (42.9% of 894 pages) from vol. 7 issue 1 in early 2020 to vol. 8 issue 3 by the end of 2021. The addition of COVID-19 related articles, requiring faster processing time reflects the added workload of the journal publishing process.

Some of the important challenges for the journal editors during the public crisis include accelerated submission to publication time required during the time of emergency like the ongoing COVID-19. Too many personal opinions and perspectives, manuscripts not written in the usual format, lacking compliance with the style of the journal as stated in the guideline to the authors are only some of the challenges faced by journal editors. Another important challenge is having an adequate number of reviewers to complete the quality review in time to meet the demand of fast dissemination of information required during the time of emergency maintaining the science of scientific information.

The dissemination of relevant scientific information and maintaining the quality of publication during a crisis is the important responsibility of biomedical journals to counter the disinformation circulating on social media. The amplification of information is a risk for the community, healthcare

personnel, and government which is desperate for decisions in the time of crisis.

In the pandemic period, the surge in COVID-19 related submission requiring acceleration of the publication process has been one of the important responsibilities of the biomedical journals for timely and faster information dissemination and maintaining the quality of the publications for the scientific evidence to help in migration and management of the COVID-19. Thus, while a fast-track publication with an expedited review is necessary during a time of crisis like COVID-19, it also requires more scientific rigor from all stakeholders for the accurate information that may be used for public health decision-making.

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