

# Dental Journalism: Finding Fact, Fiction, Fallacies, Fraud...

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*According to an opinion poll doctors topped the list among various professionals whom the public believe the most in telling truth; while journalists were on the bottom of the list. The MORI poll carried on behalf of British Medical Association showed that 87% believe doctors don't lie, while 85% assume journalists don't report truth. Surfacing amidst the trust bestowed upon the doctors and mistrust for the journalists, this article attempts to explain various aspects of dental journalism.*

Journalism is the art and science of preparing write-up literature to publish the article in variety of mass media like print, electronic or internet. Biomedical journalism is the reporting of health-related news or article usually for a newspaper, magazine or journal. Specific examples include journal articles, supplements, newsletters, proceedings, meeting highlights, disease monographs, educational materials or videos, information brochure or posters, interviews on newspaper, radio, television, websites, interactive web or teleconferences.

Dental journalism is a part of biomedical journalism. Biomedical field includes the areas of medicine, dentistry, public health, pharmaceuticals, health sciences, health policy, health economics, health care management etc. It is a matter of debate as to whether a dentist should act as a dental journalist or journalist should write on dental health issues. It is best left to the discretion of the interested individual who wants to highlight this subject, in which the target audience is best aimed.

A dental journalist has to possess the qualities and characteristics of a biomedical journalist, practicing all the criteria and rules required for biomedical journalism. Personal characteristics such as truthfulness, independency, accuracy, morality, courage, creativity, curiosity, relevancy and practicability are required for a dental journalist. They should possess the knowledge and educational background including research methodology and biostatistics; and should be willing to pursue further investigation and research.

The journalist's role in health literature is a responsible job, as Mark Twain illustrated; "be careful about reading health books, you may die of a misprint." International Federation of Journalists, in its Declaration of Principles on Conduct of Journalists (1954) declared, "Respect for truth and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of journalist....."

In recent times dental journalism has evolved as a career. Career pathways include reporting on dental health-related issues for mainstream media outlets, freelance journalism and writing for dental or scientific journals. They must compose news and articles based on the latest scientific and medical breakthroughs. The articles could either address the general public or healthcare professionals. These materials should be disseminated within the norms and ethical values laid down by medical council and health research council.

American Association for Dental Editors in 2003 necessitated the certification for dental editors with completion of continuing education in dental journalism related to writing (feature writing, news writing, reporting, editorial); editing (copyediting, proofreading, photography and illustration, layout and design, desktop publishing); editorial leadership (management of periodicals, ethics); and communications (public relations, grant writing, fundraising, speech writing and oral presentations, printing).

A biomedical writer should propagate the public health information and policy documents that increase the awareness of a health issue; build attitude to create individual or group action, demonstrate demand for health service or action. They must write the content within a multitude of media in contemporary educational and communication methods. Dental journalists must know how to translate technical information into easy-to-understand language.

The major obligations of the dental journalist are to aware, awake, advocate and expose the facts, fiction, fallacies and frauds related to dentistry. The dental journalism should address the concern over dental public health to aware the people on oral health preventive measures. They should inform the people regarding treatment possibilities and management of dental diseases. They should help common people to access the dental care and make aware of the social stigma and myths related to dentistry, breaking the socio-economic barrier related to dental health.

Media can raise the critical issues related to dentistry regarding the prosecution of illegal and unethical practice carried by non-qualified/less-than qualified practitioners, cessation of unregistered dental clinics and unauthorized advertisement of dental service providers. They should demand for dental service and allocation of dental health human resource in deprived community.

The dental journalism shall address the rights and duties of the dentists; by defining the job description and job limitation of the dental health man-power at all levels including that of the dental auxiliaries. It can support the demand for oral health authority like oral health division within the government health service, promulgation of dental act and formation of dental council in the Nepalese context. Thus dental journalism can be a representative voice of all dental professionals.

The dental journalists shall develop the prose that promotes the exchange of clinical information within the fraternity, improving the delivery of dental technology, thus enhancing patient care and treatment outcome. They can create marketing materials to help promote dental products or services targeted to the healthcare community or general public. Promotional materials geared to healthcare professionals are called 'medical marketing communications' and those to the general public are called 'consumer advertising'.

A pertinent question however remains; why do so many journals fail to sustain? Financial constrains are often cited as the primary reason, others blame it on dental manufacturers or traders. Probably the most controversial feature of dental journalism is the 'conflict of interest' between independent and trade publications, also referred to as 'non-proprietary' and 'proprietary' respectively. Trade publications are supported by dental manufacturing and trading companies, which use them to advertise the dental products.

The dental profession had made several attempts to change its literary situation. However, many efforts to publish an independent journal failed. They either ceased to exist or were sold to dental manufacturers, who were able to publish them profitably. Even dentistry's first journal 'American Journal of Dental Science' (1839-1909) had a traumatic history. It is the representative story of most of the early independent publications. It was published at a loss for several years; then it was sold to a dental dealer. This publication was revived several times until it was finally discontinued.

In the renaissance period, the reversing of the trend appeared; yet by 1900, the domination of the trade journals had begun to fall down as the dental profession was much more organized and strengthened which raised its efforts to establish the literature independently. Soon most of the proprietary journals failed to be appreciated and were discontinued. Thus the dental periodical literature was transformed from owned proprietary to independent literature promoted by official dental societies or associations. However, in recent times re-reversal of the trend has been witnessed in dental literature ownership, once again dental manufacturing/ trading companies, pharmaceutical companies, or publishing houses are sponsoring many of the leading journals.

Many a times, scientific dental literature is skewed by publication bias. For example, research articles demonstrating that a treatment works well are more likely to be published than a truthful with uncertain result, showing that the treatment has no useful effect. No researcher or author wants to publish a randomized trial to show that his report does not help the subject. On the other hand, economic incentives by the companies to researchers tend to dictate the studies that are likely to show the results of their interest, or to omit the negative findings.

The dental journalism face setback from its own dental audience due to the lack of reading habits and neglecting attitude towards the publication. Another common criticism of the journal is that it is "too scientific"; thus overall demand for journal literature is still low. Dental journalism is also hindered because individual and institutional financial support from the dental fraternity is very limited. Consequently the dental publications has no stable source of funds to sustain itself thus are compelled to solicit the sponsors for advertising. Besides, the voluntary editing task, printing cost, and dissemination of the journal are yet other difficult challenges.

The global experience of dental journalism could be an inspiring as well as forewarning verdict to the young Nepalese dentistry which is crawling the path of journalism. All dental professionals, institutions and professional societies should contribute for the establishment and survival of the dental journals. It will surely pave through the ups and downs crossing numerous hurdles; nevertheless, dental journalism is a passion that will continue to surface.



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