How to Publish? Strategies for successful medical publication drawing on the experiences of North African researchers

Comment publier? Stratégies pour réussir une publication médicale en s'appuyant sur l'expérience des chercheurs nord-africains

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Abstract

Background: Publication is crucial for disseminating research findings and advancing scientific knowledge. However, medical researchers in developing countries face significant challenges in publishing their work due to limited resources, mentorship, and access to high-impact journals. This study aimed to identify strategies for successful medical publication, drawing on the experiences of Tunisian researchers.

Methods: This perspective-based study combines a comprehensive literature review with expert-facilitated group discussions. A research session held at the Faculty of Medicine of Sousse (Tunisia) brought together 44 participants from diverse medical specialties. The session included group discussions and expert presentations to explore strategies for successful medical publication.

Result: Key strategies for successful publication were identified, including defining the target manuscript, choosing the appropriate journal, preparing a structured manuscript, ensuring clear and concise writing, following journal-specific guidelines, and adhering to ethical considerations. Other important aspects, such as identifying authorship, avoiding predatory journals, disclosure of conflicts, acknowledgements, cover letters, and responses to peer reviews, were often neglected in the feedback of Tunisian researchers.

Conclusion: Strengthening the publishing capacity of researchers in developing countries requires targeted training programs and institutional support. By implementing best practices in manuscript preparation and submission, researchers can enhance their chances of publication in high-quality medical journals.

Keywords: Biomedical Research, Global Health, Low- and Middle-Income Countries, Manuscripts, Medical Writing, Publication

Résumé

Contexte: La publication est cruciale pour la diffusion des résultats de recherche et l'avancement scientifiques. Cependant, les chercheurs en médecine des pays en développement font face à des obstacles liés aux ressources limitées, au manque de mentorat et à l'accès restreint aux revues à fort impact. Cette étude avait comme objectif d'identifier des stratégies pour une publication médicale réussie, en s'appuyant sur les expériences des chercheurs Tunisiens.

Méthodes: Étude de réflexion combinant revue de littérature et discussions de groupe animées par des experts. Une session organisée à la Faculté de Médecine de Sousse (Tunisie) a réuni 44 participants issus de diverses spécialités médicales, incluant des présentations d'experts et des échanges collaboratifs.

Résultat: Des stratégies clés pour une publication réussie ont été identifiées, notamment la définition de l'étude cible, le choix du journal approprié, la préparation d'un manuscrit structuré, la rédaction claire et concise, le respect des instructions aux auteurs, et l'adhésion aux considérations éthiques. D'autres aspects importants, tels que le respect de la paternité, la nécessité d'éviter les revues prédatrices, la divulgation des conflits d'intérêts, les remerciements, la lettre d'accompagnement et les réponses aux évaluations par les pairs, ont souvent été négligés dans les réponses des chercheurs Tunisiens.

Conclusion: Renforcer la capacité de publication des chercheurs dans les pays en développement nécessite des programmes de formation ciblés et un soutien institutionnel. En mettant en œuvre les meilleures pratiques de préparation et de soumission des manuscrits, les chercheurs peuvent améliorer leurs chances de publication dans des revues médicales de haute qualité.

Mots clés: Manuscrits, Pays à Revenu Faible ou Intermédiaire, Publication, Recherche biomédicale, Rédaction médicale, Santé mondiale

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Successfully publishing requires anticipating and overcoming the many pitfalls along the way…

Introduction

Publication is essential to disseminate research results enabling scientific contributions within the academic community (1). Publication provides means to validate the findings, generate rigorous criticism, and catalyze innovation and progress in the field (1). "Publish or perish" underscores the pressure on academics to disseminate their research (2). Yet, for medical researchers in low- and middle- income countries (LMIC), such as Tunisia, limited resources, mentorship, and access to high-impact journals often challenge publication (3). As a result, the LMIC have a disproportionately low scientific output compared to high-income countries (HIC), contributing only 2% of indexed journal publications globally (4). An analysis of 2022 articles in five major medical journals (ie; British Medical Journal, The Lancet, New England Journal of Medicine, Annals of Internal Medicine, and the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)) found that researchers from outside the United States, United Kingdom, and Europe authored just 11.9% (5). In 2023, the World Health Organization reported 23250 clinical trials in the Western Pacific region, compared to only 845 in Africa (6). Furthermore, the acceptance rate for manuscripts was 16.6% overall, but just 4.8% for submissions from LMIC, according to a survey of eight high-impact psychiatric journals (7). Manuscripts from HIC were 5.8 times more likely to be accepted than those from their LMIC (7). These figures highlight the significant barriers faced by researchers in LMIC when it comes to publishing in prestigious medical journals.
This perspective-based study aimed to identify strategies for successful medical publication, drawing on the experiences of Tunisian researchers.

Methods

The current study is one of three components of a project that addresses the following three queries: How, when and why to publish? The purpose of the first section (ie; Why to publish) was to review the theoretical justifications and incentives that push medical researchers to participate in the publication process and identify those of researchers from LMICs (8). The second part (ie; How to publish) is the aim of this study. The third part (ie; When to publish) aimed to determine the most appropriate timing for manuscript submission, based on the experiences of Tunisian researchers (9). This is a perspective-based study combining structured, expert-facilitated collaborative group discussions with a comprehensive literature review.
The Research Committee of the Faculty of Medicine in Sousse, Tunisia organized a three-hour research brainstorm session from 14:00 to 17:00 on February 18, 2025, with the theme "Kickoff — Why, When, and How to Publish?". Through its official Facebook page and email, the committee invited all faculty members and PhD students associated with the doctoral school. Forty-four participants, of whom 48% were women, attended the session. Medical (48%), basic sciences (18%), surgery (14%), and dentistry (9%) were among the specialties represented by the participants. Furthermore, 11% of the attendance were PhD students. According to Scopus data, the median (interquartile range) number of publications and h-index of participants were 2.0 (0.0; 6.5) and 0.5 (0.0; 2.0), respectively. Participants were divided into seven tables at random for the session, with roughly six people at each table. A spokesperson was given to each table. An expert in medical writing (HBS on the authors' list) led the session. The expert started the interactive style by handing out thought-provoking questions on scraps of paper, including "How to publish?". After reflecting and writing their answers for five to seven minutes, participants had five minutes to debate the topic as a group. After then, the cumulative insights from each spokesperson's table were compiled and examined. The expert then went on to discuss the main facets of academic publication in a PowerPoint presentation. An open discussion that followed the lecture allowed for more clarification and idea sharing. A survey of pertinent literature, expert presentation, and participant input were used to construct this report.

Results and discussion

Thirty-three participants gave feedback on the question "How to publish?". The median (interquartile range) number of steps for the publication process identified by each researcher was three (2-6), revealing a surprisingly limited familiarity with the publication process among researchers who are expected to be experienced publishers. The participants' responses are summarized in Table 1. Participants tended to overlook some key elements. In particular, authorship was identified as a frequent source of conflict among colleagues. In LMIC, predatory journals are prevalent due to their lenient review processes (10). Moreover, the cover letter serves as an essential promotional tool for the article, especially in countries where publication opportunities are limited. These findings suggest that while key components of the publication process are recognized, especially those directly affecting the presentation and credibility of research, additional factors may require further emphasis in academic training and support.

Based on the expert's presentation and a review of the relevant literature (11-28), we have identified key strategies and steps essential for successful publication, effectively answering the question «How to publish?». The publishing process requires foresight and the ability to overcome many challenges (11-28). The key elements to consider are as follows:

Define the target manuscript

Before drafting a manuscript, a critical initial step involves clearly defining its nature and scope (2).

Table 1. Responses of the 33 participants (university hospital doctors and doctoral students) to the question: How to publish?

Publication phase	How to publish?	Expressions used	Percentage
1-Planning	**Defining the target topic**	Choose a popular theme Pick a trendy subject	**15**
	Drawing up a study design	A good methodology Preparing a research protocol according to a well-structured study design Following guidelines (***eg***; STROBE, SIGMA, etc.)	**15**
2- Journal selection	**Choosing the appropriate journal**	Choose the journal Select a relevant journal Target a journal Choose the most appropriate journal	**57**
	Aligning the research study with the journal's thematic	Choose the journal that corresponds to the topic Choose the journal according to the subject Aim and scope of the journal	**21**
	Targeting a prestigious journal (high-impact, well-indexed)	Choosing a journal with high impact factor Choosing prestigious journals Choosing a journal indexed and impacted	**6**
	Opening access availability	Free access	**3**
	Publication fees	Free of charges Article processing charges	**6**
3- Manuscript preparation	**Preparing the manuscript**	Prepare the manuscript	**6**
	Drafting using the IMRaD® structure for original studies	Conclude Respect the IMRaD® structure Follow the IMRaD® plan	**87**
	Respecting the rules of drafting	Using an appropriate writing style Respecting the rules for writing Attractive title	**3**
	Following the instructions to authors	Consult the instructions for authors Verify the journal's guidelines/recommendations Comply with the journal's publication criteria	**60**
	Publication language	Publish in English	**9**
	Plagiarism	Avoiding plagiarism	**3**
	Complaining with medical ethics	Respect for medical ethics	**6**
4- Submission	**Manuscript submission**	Follow the submission steps Publish in a journal Submit the article	**12**

IMRaD®: Introduction, methods, results, discussion and References. SIGMA: Surgical innovation and global models of analysis. STROBE: Strengthening the reporting of observational studies in epidemiology

Note: Answers were translated from French to English using the Deep L translator tool.

This decision, informed by the preceding stages of research (formulating a focused question, conducting a thorough literature search to identify knowledge gaps, and designing a robust study protocol) directly shapes the subsequent writing process (29). Authors must determine if their work will present novel findings as an original research article, synthesize existing knowledge as a didactic review, or adopt another format (2). To ensure comprehensive and transparent reporting aligned with the chosen manuscript type, consulting the "Enhancing the QUAlity and Transparency Of health Research" (EQUATOR) Network library is highly recommended (30). This invaluable resource offers a searchable database of reporting guidelines and links to other tools relevant to research reporting (30), thereby enhancing the clinical significance and credibility of the final publication. For example, it is recommended to follow some guidelines such as the CARE (31), SCARE (32), PROCESS (33), CONSORT (34), PRISMA (35), or STROBE (36) taking into account the study design.

Choosing the appropriate journal

It is one of the initial considerations in the publication process (16). The selection primarily hinges on the target readership and the specific field of study (16). It is advisable to identify alternative journals in case of manuscript rejection (16). Several factors must be evaluated, including alignment of the study with the journal's aims and scope, indexing status, impact factor, publication fees, publication turnaround time, open access availability, the robustness of the peer review process, and copyright policies (37). In the case of doubt, contacting the editors or editorial board members is a quick way to assess the article's suitability for the journal in question (16).

It is important to avoid both predatory journals and low-quality ones (38). Young researchers from low- and

middle- income countries with limited resources for publishing in high-impact journals are easy prey for these predatory journals. Experienced mentors, colleagues, and librarians can offer valuable assistance (38). Given the importance of this issue, a recent editorial entitled "Predatory Journals — What Can We Do to Protect Their Prey?" was published simultaneously in Annals of Internal Medicine, The BMJ, Bulletin of the World Health Organization, Deutsches Ärzteblatt (German Medical Journal), JAMA, Journal of Korean Medical Science, The Lancet, La Tunisie Médicale, The National Medical Journal of India, Medwave, Nature Medicine, New England Journal of Medicine, New Zealand Medical Journal, and PLOS Medicine (38). In 2019, an international panel of experts established a consensus definition of predatory journals (39). A list of criteria is established for their identification, which remains difficult (38, 39). The center for Journalology, hosted by The Ottawa Hospital in Canada, offers the most comprehensive resource on predatory journals (39). Some tools (eg; Think Check Submit (41), Compass to Publish (42)) can help identify trustworthy journals, and are easy to use (10).

Authorship

Deciding authorship order, roles, and the corresponding author in advance is crucial to prevent conflicts (11). Typically, the researcher who performs the work or who wrote the first draft, is listed first, while the mentor occupies the last position, and the corresponding author is either the first author or a senior team member (2). According to the 2025 International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (43), authors must meet four criteria: (i) Make substantial contributions to the conception, design, data acquisition, analysis, or interpretation, and (ii) Draft or critically revise the manuscript, and (iii) Approve the final version to be published, and (iv) Agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work. Only those fulfilling all four criteria should be listed as authors (43). Other contributors should be acknowledged. Some journals require a detailed declaration of contributions to prevent honorary and ghost authorship, promoting transparency and accountability (43). In some situations and in order to valorize the work done by some authors, it can be noted inside the manuscript, that some authors have equal contributions as first author or as senior authors, as done is some papers (44, 45).

Manuscript preparation

Title, keywords and abstract

The manuscript title is the first impression; it should be clear, concise, and accurately reflect the core content (15, 46). Studies highlighted that readers spend less than two seconds evaluating a title (37). Since search engines depend on keywords, selecting terms from the Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) thesaurus used by PubMed significantly improves visibility and citation potential (47). The abstract must succinctly summarize the manuscript and adhere to the word limit specified in the author guidelines (46, 48).

Manuscript structure

Clinical research manuscripts mostly follow a clear and standardized structure, typically the IMRaD® format (Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion, and References) (12-14, 17-19, 25). Various guidelines exist for reporting different types of research (30, 49). All sections must be sufficiently detailed, correctly positioned and weighted (30, 49, 50). The methodology should be rigorous, with sample size calculations (51), and the use of statistical tests appropriate to the study (25). In addition, the results need to be clearly described and interpreted in the discussion section (25), considering both statistical significance and clinical relevance (52). References must be formatted according to the journal's guidelines using a referencing tool (12).

Drafting rules

Moreover, manuscript acceptance is more likely when written in polished, fluent scientific English (24). Non-native English-speaking authors can benefit from medical writing support or artificial intelligence-driven writing assistance, and such contributions should be acknowledged (53). Concision, clarity, precision and simple writing improve reader understanding and reduce publication costs (24). Data should be presented efficiently and focused on the study's main objective (1, 24). Effective tables and figures are crucial for presenting findings and enhancing manuscript conciseness (17, 19).

Plagiarism

Furthermore, when writing a manuscript, it is essential to avoid plagiarism (including self-plagiarism), falsification and fabrication (54-56). All authors are responsible for any such infractions (43). Any fraud can lead to consequences ranging from article retraction to criminal prosecution (43).

Disclosure of conflicts of interest and acknowledgments

Disclosure of conflicts of interest is now standardized in most clinical journals, and authors must acknowledge all industry support received for their research, whether direct or indirect (1).

Ethic consideration

All research involving humans must follow the principles of the Helsinki Declaration (57). The authors should obtain approval from an independent ethics committee or institutional review board and provide documentation upon request (25). However, journal editors may still independently assess ethical conduct (25, 43). Authors must protect participants' privacy and remove any identifying details (25, 43). If identification is possible, written consent is required from participants (25, 43). The committee on publication ethics offers guidance to editors and publishers on all facets of publication ethics (58).

Revising the manuscript with colleagues

Once it has been drafted, sharing the manuscript with co-authors and one or two non-authors provides an opportunity to gather constructive feedback and ensure

that the ideas are clearly and accurately expressed (1).

Journal submission

Instructions for authors

Authors are asked to follow the "instructions for authors" both when preparing their manuscript and during submission. Authors are asked to avoid submitting the same manuscript to more than one journal simultaneously, as it is an unethical practice that misuses editorial and peer review resources (59).

Cover letter

The cover letter is essential for promoting any study to the journal editor, yet it should be kept as brief as possible, and must follow specific guidelines (26, 27). The cover letter should state the manuscript title and highlight both the study's significance and the relevance of the study to the journal's audience (21, 26, 27).

Journal peer reviewing

The manuscript is first reviewed by a member of the editorial team, who assesses its suitability (60, 61). If appropriate, the manuscript is sent to two or three peer reviewers (60). Based on their feedback, a decision is made ranging from minor or major revisions, a complete rewrite, acceptance (rare), or rejection (60). For instance, JAMA Internal Medicine stated that 78% of the manuscripts submitted in 2017 were rejected without undergoing review (62). The main reasons manuscripts are rejected without review include mismatching the journal's scope, lack of novelty or originality, poor study design, language barriers and failure to adhere to submission guidelines (63). Melki et al. (64) have described the major mistakes done by researchers from LMIC in scientific medical writing based on manuscripts' reviews.

Response to reviewer

A prompt response is encouraged (22, 28). When submitting a revised manuscript, authors are asked to include a cover letter with detailed, point-by-point responses to each reviewer's comment (28). The authors must address all feedback thoroughly and highlight changes in the manuscript for easy review (28). If certain data are unavailable, the authors are encouraged to clearly state this (28). While it may not be possible to implement every suggestion, making a respectful and thoughtful effort along with providing clear justification for any unaddressed points often leads to acceptance (1, 22, 28). If rejected, the authors are asked to revise the manuscript based on reviewers' valid feedback and consider resubmission to a relevant journal.

Strengths and limitations of the study

This study offers important insights into the medical publication process through the integration of participant experiences, expert perspectives, and a comprehensive literature review. The workshop-based methodology facilitated the identification of practical challenges and strategies, particularly within the context of LMIC. Nonetheless, the relatively small sample size may constrain the generalizability of the findings, a limitation inherent to its design as an extension of previously published work involving the same cohort (8, 9). Furthermore, given the study's focus on a specific academic environment in Tunisia, the applicability of results to other settings may be limited. Future research encompassing larger and more diverse populations is necessary to corroborate and extend these findings.

Conclusion

Scientific publishing is essential for advancing academic careers. This perspective article reviewed the key strategies required for successful publication, including selecting an appropriate journal, adhering to its specific guidelines, and implementing simple yet effective best practices in manuscript preparation. Developing countries have limited publishing capacity. Strengthening this capacity requires targeted training programs and strong institutional support to foster a more dynamic and effective research environment.

To take home message

Successfully publishing medical research, especially for researchers in low- and middle-income countries like Tunisia, requires understanding and navigating a complex process involving multiple strategic steps—from defining the manuscript type to responding to peer reviewers—while overcoming significant systemic and structural challenges.

Abbreviations' list

BMJ: British Medical Journal
CARE: Case report guidelines
CONSORT: Consolidated standards of reporting trials
HIC: High-income countries
JAMA: Journal of the American medical association
LMIC: Low- and middle-income countries
PRISMA: Preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses
PROCESS: Preferred reporting of case series in surgery
SCARE: Surgical case report guidelines
STROBE: Strengthening the reporting of observational studies in epidemiology

DECLARATION. The authors wish to disclose that two artificial intelligence tools (ie; Quillbot and ChatGPT ephemeral) were utilized to enhance the clarity and coherence of the manuscript' writing. The tool was utilized for language refinement purposes only, ensuring the text was clear and coherent without altering the scientific content (61, 65, 66).

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in refining our manuscript (28).

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS.

All authors: Literature search, Manuscript preparation and Review of manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT. None

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