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## Letter to the Editor

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### Current status of medical journalism in Iran

There is only one hard measure of the scientific worth of a country: the quantity and quality of its science publications. This one barometer of progress also happens to accurately reflect a country's sociopolitical stature in the international community. Medical journalism in Iran, as gauged by the number and scientific value of published articles, is not what it is or should be. This does not say, however, what is wrong with this situation, anymore than a low blood pressure recording would reveal the underlying cause of heart disease. For a better understanding of medical journalism in this country, it is necessary to do take a short history and do a quick physical examination. It might then be possible to prescribe a remedy.

The single most important reason why Iran is not up to international standards in the medical sciences, is that the entire system of higher education in this country came into operation only seventy years ago. This is far too short a period for a "culture of science" to develop and mature. Even then it was a wrong start: Tehran University was organized as another government institution with all its faculty members employed as civil servants. This was unavoidable at that time, as there was no private sector to financially support such an undertaking. Predictably, Iranian universities were at first nothing more than sophisticated secondary schools. The spirit of inquiry, intellectual exchange, experimentation, and academic competition never entered anyone's mind.

The turmoil of World War II interrupted, or better stated, stopped what improvement may have taken place in the Iranian system of higher education. A window of opportunity opened up a decade or so after the War when western-educated Iranian students, particularly from the USA, began returning home in the late fifties and sixties. But nothing happened: these scholastically-prepared returnees chose to pursue sociopolitical careers rather than improve the academic conditions of the universities. The Islamic Revolution, a quarter of a century ago was, therefore, a welcome change. The Iraq-Iran War, however, put on the brakes. More disheartening was a steep rise in population figures, unavoidably shifting the emphasis in higher education from quality to quantity. So much

for a short history of higher education in Iran. A cursory physical examination of the situation reveals absence of a valid and agreed-upon merit system based strictly on academic achievement. This is understandable as civil service status neither encourages the faculty to scholastic endeavor nor penalizes poor academic performance. Only recently has publishing scientific paper become a serious consideration, even a requirement for academic promotion. However, with almost eighty medical journals vying for articles, just about any piece of writing is bound to appear in print sooner or later, advancing the official rank of its author(s). While research funds have become available, the needed infrastructure or basic concepts of scientific research are not in place yet. Too many faculty members of our medical schools look at research as an imposed encumbrance rather than a privileged and necessary intellectual opportunity.

The prognosis appears guarded if not grim. The situation, however, is surprisingly more auspicious than it looks.

The number of medical articles from Iran finding their way into peer-reviewed foreign scientific journals is steadily on the rise. It is an endogenous phenomenon, therefore, and hence very promising. This has happened spontaneously and without any direct input from sources outside the country as few if any western-trained scientists have come back during past two decades. There is no satisfactory explanation for this new awareness of the importance, if not the necessity, for academic endeavor in the universities.

The general rule is that there must first be an academic improvement in medical schools before increased scientific publications surface. The reverse seems to have occurred in Iran: a rise in the number of publications has had a salutary effect on the quality of teaching. Perhaps the faculty has become aware, at last, that a university functions somewhat differently from a ministry. Greater research activity can only lead to more and better medical articles. In either case, it augurs well for medical journalism in Iran. Criteria for academic activity and advancement will improve and the barometer of scientific commotion will rise. It is too early to know whether the seventy-year-old

heavy hand of bureaucracy in our medical schools will be lifted to allow Iranian medical schools to function as true institutions of higher learning and become more competitive in the international sphere. But things look more promising than they did ever before.

At this stage, a pool of qualified peer-reviewers will have to be created to keep up the momentum,

young Iranian scientists who will set standards of academic excellence. Only then will medical journalism in Iran have come of age.

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