

Editorials



The future of medical journalism: a philosophical transaction

Online publishing provides new opportunities for today's medical students to develop their research skills

Megan L Hickie
BA, MBBS
Intern,¹ and Editor-in-Chief²

¹Emergency Department,
Canberra Hospital,
Canberra, ACT.

²Medical Student
Journal of Australia,
Canberra, ACT.

megan.hickie@
act.gov.au

doi: 10.5694/mja14.00655

On 28 November 1660, a group of 12 young men meandered out of a public astronomy lecture at Gresham College, London, and decided to form a collective. They called themselves the Royal Society of London for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge and met on a regular basis to observe experiments and discuss topics relating to natural philosophy.¹

Five years later they would publish the inaugural issue of *Philosophical Transactions*, a written record of their discussions that could be easily disseminated to all members.¹ This represented a watershed moment for scientific communication, which had previously taken the sole form of private letter from one scholar to another, privileging only the recipient with its contents.²

Had fate taken a different turn, the lads might have decided to go for beers that afternoon or return home for an early dinner. What serendipity that they instead gave birth to the first English-language scientific journal and the oldest scientific periodical in continuous publication.¹ The simple agreement of those 12 people to collect their ideas into a more accessible medium marked the advent of scientific journalism and the beginning of peer review.² Science was no longer just for the chosen few.

In 2009, a small group of medical students at the Australian National University (ANU) began publishing the *Medical Student Journal of Australia (MSJA)*. In 2013, the editorial committee expanded to a professionally structured group of 25 members. Authors from throughout the Asia-Pacific region — including from the ANU, the University of Otago in New Zealand and the Cebu Institute of Medicine in the Philippines — have contributed manuscripts via email. Volume 5 Issue 1 is now available free of charge and exclusively online at http://issuu.com/medicalstudentjournalofaustralia/docs/msja_v5i1/0 and via the journal's Facebook page. It will also soon be available on the *MSJA* website (<https://msja.anu.edu.au>).

MSJA contributors come from diverse academic fields, including medicine, epidemiology, population health, dentistry, pharmacy and health law. They reflect the average medical student of today, with previous tertiary qualifications and backgrounds in other disciplines such as social sciences and the humanities. In addition to publishing original research articles, the *MSJA* encourages contributions in the field of medical humanities. In 2013, readers were invited to submit visual pieces for consideration;

selected artworks include a photograph of an Indigenous sacred site (with permission), a digital drawing of skeletal anatomy, microscopy of motor neurones, and an acrylic on canvas depicting the eyes of an elderly patient. An article describing the collaborative program between the National Gallery of Australia and the ANU Medical School is currently in press.³

Just as the original members of the Royal Society required a Royal Charter from King Charles II to bolster the legitimacy of their pursuits, the editorial staff at the *MSJA* sought the seal of approval from Australian medical royalty. Careers pieces were generously contributed by Professor John Murtagh AM, Dr Catherine Hamlin AO, Dr Janet McCredie AM and Emeritus Professor Stephen Leeder AO, Editor-in-Chief of the *MJA*.

Like that seminal November afternoon in 1660, the advent of online publishing and open-access datasets represents an exciting and unnerving moment in the history of medical journalism. It may be tempting to give in to the anxiety surrounding the use of social media to promote research, or the fear often generated by traditional media outlets around the vulnerability of information published on the internet. However, it is important to recognise that new technologies carry with them both risk and opportunity.

The Fellows of the Royal Society could not have foreseen the impact that their publication would have on the future landscape of science academia. Similarly, it is not for us to know which of today's technological endeavours will have a lasting impression on the medical journals of tomorrow. For now, the online tools at our disposal provide new openings to develop our skills — such as the research publication opportunities that the *MSJA* is providing to doctors in training.

Acknowledgements: The *MSJA* is supported by the ANU Medical School.

Competing interests: No relevant disclosures.

Provenance: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

¹ The Royal Society. History. <https://royalsociety.org/about-us/history> (accessed May 2014).

² Borgman CL. Big data, little data, no data: scholarship in the networked world. Proceedings of the VALA2014 17th Biennial Conference and Exhibition; 2014 Feb 3-6; Melbourne, Australia. <http://www.vala.org.au/vala2014-proceedings> (accessed Jun 2014).

³ Wild F. Artmed — a surprising synergy. *Med Stud J Aust* 2014. In press. □