

**Editorial**

**Some perspectives on paediatric research**

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It is a much cited *cliché* that research is the pivotal keystone of progress in science. This is particularly true of medicine. There is no doubt whatsoever that what has been achieved towards eradicating or controlling killer and debilitating maladies affecting mankind, particularly children, has been mainly due to dedicated researchers who worked determinedly and unwaveringly towards their own pre-set goals. All those concerned with the clinical care of children have a responsibility to improve that care, and one way of achieving this is by research<sup>1</sup>. However, as much as such proclamations should be acclaimed, it is also necessary to point out that research in children presents exceptional challenges as well<sup>2</sup>. These include a plethora of ethical issues that are particular to very many studies involving children.

Being a researcher requires motivation and relentless commitment to the cause. A burning desire to try and satisfy a curious, probing and investigative mind is the hallmark of a good researcher. Yet for all that, maintaining a high level of passion and concentration in taking up a research culture can be quite difficult, especially when things do not go as planned. Sheer forces of circumstances, non-familiarity with research methods, a dearth of adequate guidance, inadequacies of writing skills and lack of funding, are perhaps some of the perceived reasons amongst a whole plethora of causes that seem to have a negative effect on many clinicians and even academics taking up research. However, in many situations, especially in a country like Sri Lanka, excellent material is always available for these endeavours. Yet for all that, especially in clinical situations, the workload is so heavy in a day-to-day scenario that many clinicians are not able to, or in some cases not inclined to, perform any research. Such commitment to the burden of work, in the National Health Service as well as the private sector, certainly leaves very little time for research. Nevertheless, it must also be pointed out that some of the very best research initiatives have been from extremely busy clinicians. They are probably the people who possess an inherently endowed inquisitive and analytical mind. Most of them do enjoy the challenges as well as the accompanying accolades of research. Even if the light at the end of the tunnel is very far away, they will make a bid to reach it through diligence and painstaking work. That enviable and much admired talent is probably an innate trait in them.

The well documented reluctance on the part of many medical practitioners to undertake research is seen not only in developing countries but even in the developed world. In the United Kingdom (UK), a Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health study of nearly 2,000 paediatricians in Great Britain has revealed that amongst consultant paediatricians, over 80% have no programmed activities in their job plan for research, more than half undertake no research work at all, those undertaking research spend almost the same amount of time on research work that is unpaid as paid and that nearly 90% do not receive grants for research<sup>3</sup>. These illuminating findings are quite contrary to the popular belief that in that country, loads and loads of research projects are undertaken, on a day-to-day basis.

In a related situation in the local scenario, it is sometimes observed that junior and senior clinicians, and even para-clinical professionals, perform high quality research and present them at Scientific Congresses. However, most unfortunately, very few of them ultimately get documented as publications of original articles in journals. This is a great pity as valuable information is lost to the scientific world as a result of these occurrences. However, even in such an outlook, this phenomenon does not seem to be peculiar to Sri Lanka. As chronicled in the *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, such a spectacle is seen even in the UK where significant numbers of presentations at the Paediatric Research Society and the British Paediatric Association ultimately did not get into journals<sup>4</sup>. The authors of that article concluded that “presenters to paediatric meetings need help in submitting and publishing their work”<sup>4</sup>.

From the stance of our own country, help for researchers and authors is undeniably available. It is accessible not only from personnel resident nationally but also those based in other countries. With the advances in Information Communication Technology, great distances are no longer a barrier to effective communication. Help can be sought even from far off places. A case in point is the ‘Author AID’ programme<sup>5</sup> of the International Network for Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP). That initiative is a global network which provides support, mentoring, resources and training for researchers in developing countries<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, it should be extolled that there are such volunteers to give a helping hand to potential authors.

Some authors and potential authors do tend to feel that the processes involved in securing acceptance by some journals are rather tedious and far too stringent for their liking. Yet for all that, it is pertinent to point out that articles in medical journals are a part of the permanent scientific record<sup>6</sup>. Journals have many responsibilities to ensure that proper guidelines are followed before an article is exposed in the public domain. Such guiding principles are formulated by many agencies including International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE)<sup>7</sup>. ICMJE Guidelines<sup>8</sup> are currently used by many journals. Such guiding principles have stringent conditions to be fulfilled by not only authors but also all others involved in the medical journal publication processes. In fact, as far as the authors are concerned, the ICMJE very clearly defines their roles, their definitions and their responsibilities<sup>9</sup>. It is imperative to appreciate that it is most desirable to comply with International Standards if scientific publications are to receive the accolades that they crave for.

We, at The *Sri Lanka Journal of Child Health*, have recently taken steps to revamp our Editorial Board, International Advisory Panel, Journal Policies on Publication Ethics and Malpractices as well as Author Guidelines. That venture was undertaken with the essential goal of falling in line with International Publication Standards. The authorities in the journal will attempt to ensure that proper standards are maintained and proper ethical principles are adhered to, by all concerned and particularly by the authors<sup>10</sup>. The declared goals as proclaimed in the vision, mission and values of our publisher, the Sri Lanka College of Paediatricians<sup>11</sup>, is to try and achieve the highest levels of excellence. In that process we will try our best to invite our researchers to take to heart the memorable words of Albert Einstein, who said “*to raise new questions, new possibilities, to regard old problems from a new angle, requires creative imagination and marks real advance in science*”.

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