Title: Comment on “Regressive trend: MCI's approach to assessment of medical teachers' performance”

Abstract: The editorial on MCI guidelines is replete with typos and content which leads us to suspect the depth of knowledge about research in the committee which has promulgated these. We believe that there needs to be rethinking of the policy on publications and external experts need to be consulted. The open access journals need to be reinstated as valid journals for publication. Also other varieties of articles should be allowed for promotion. The preference for author order also needs to be removed.

Dear Editor,

We read with great interest the editorial “Regressive trend: MCIs approach to assessment of medical teachers’ performance” (1). MCI is the holy cow of Medical Education, and we are yet to see a detailed critique of its various policies by persons who are directly regulated by MCI. In an era of evidence based medicine and evidence based policy making, India definitely lags behind in health policies that are based on evidence as well as policies that regulate education based on evidence (2). We have all along not paid attention to the various committees that regulate Medical Education as many of them do have conflict of interest with their positions in medical colleges, and hence do not have an independent opinion. For most of us in medical colleges, the regulations are there to be followed and are not challenged. While the world has moved beyond regulations for floor space and number of chairs in OPDs, MCI standards are stuck in previous century, and are caught in a time warp. Hence it was not surprising to see the regulations on research publication in the context of promotion. Your article presents a nuanced argument to many points in the circular. What was however shocking to us in the circular was the number of typos that crept in and the ignorance related to much of the terminology. This circular must have been circulated to more than 500 educational heads and thousands of faculty. If there can be one sure way to erode one’s credibility; it is by making multiple typos in a circular of immense importance. Historically typos have resulted in regime changes and company liquidations (3).

Your article has elucidated on the various kinds of research papers that needs to be considered and their contribution to dialogue and knowledge creation. At point "b" it says Original Research Articles and Original Research Papers. Does this circular indicate that educationists at the highest echelons of regulation of the medical fraternity have a pronounced disconnect with education? Is there hope for young minds making their way into the medical profession if there is utter confusion and disregard for academia at the highest levels? Systematic reviews involve a lot of diligent work and are not being considered. Yet they are the first articles that we need to consult when we make evidence based decisions in clinical care. Smaller research briefs or articles may not be considered even though they were original research. With current norms, Watson and Crick who published a one-page article on the structure of DNA may not be promoted (4). We submitted a small study in a subject journal as an original article. The journal decided to accept it only if it was shortened in length, to a category called as Brief Report. We agreed and the manuscript was published in the highest impact factor journal in subject category in India (5). Yet one of the authors in the article faced an issue in promotion as this was not considered as an “Original Article”. Irony died a terrible death when one of the experts who came for the interview suggested to the concerned faculty, submission of a small paper to any e-journal, and pay Rs 4000 to Rs 5000 to get it published as an original article. We however brought this to the notice of the journal and explained the problem to them. They issued a letter to us stating that it is an original article, and have subsequently discontinued the category of Brief Report to prevent hardships to genuine and honest researchers. This is an example of how policies and typos can influence careers, and are interpreted conveniently by administration.

The point "c" which talks about national and international societies and their publications is unnecessary as it needs to follow point “a” all the same. However, it is interesting to us how we can define something as national or international. As it has been seen in the expose done in 2013, a few “American” journals were published from Pakistan (6). How does naming a journal in a particular way give it legitimacy? We were recently informed of plagiarism by one of our faculty in a national journal of a well- known society that has existed for more than five decades. On investigation and evaluation by external experts, it was concluded that systematic reviews need to be written in a particular way and the charge of plagiarism was unfounded. However, the investigations revealed that the journal had barely published five systematic reviews so far. We believe that the reviewers and the editorial team were not experts in reviewing systematic reviews, and did not follow COPE guidelines while reporting the authors. It leads us to question the credibility of the journal and the editorial team, and their power to report authors causing irreversible damage to faculty. We have personal experience of this scenario playing out in other committees such as ethics committees, promotion committees, etc. where the persons judging the issues have barely any experience or knowledge of the same. A recently published paper showed how ethics committee members didn't have adequate research knowledge, and yet they decide on research proposals (7). It is surprising that in the 21st century, many academicians have to face a situation that was faced by Galileo and Darwin eons ago (8).

You have well elaborated on the issues of authorship and e-journals. We have seen many senior professors that are on the verge of retirement; wanting to be first authors on papers that they have not spent much time on. In such a scenario, it is conceivable that the MCI has paid more attention to the first two positions. The academic fraternity is not yet sure which way to go on the authorship issue, and there have been guidance issued by various organizations. While some journals restrict the number of authors, others do not allow many authors to claim first authorship status. It is further complicated, when many awards for conferences are available to only the first authors. Since authorship guidelines for most journals place equal responsibility of the paper on all authors, acknowledging only the first two definitely indicates a regressive step. As you pointed out; much of the research requires collaborations between various disciplines, and hence having more authors who are responsible can improve research. Otherwise even before a project begins there will be discussions on the first two authors.

E-journals have been dismissed summarily. This cursory comment flies starkly against the stand taken recently by a few universities in the US where they have actively discouraged publication in for profit journals run by Elsevier (which runs Scopus), etc (9). The international narrative is in favor of Open Access publications that are free to download in which the ‘author pays’ model is being favored (10). However, the problem with open access model is that anyone with an internet connection, and a few thousands of rupees to spare can start a journal from his kitchen. The MCI probably is aware of these trends, and is trying to discourage it. But by using terminology such as e-journals, it is throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

We have grappled with these issues and have devised our own publication guidelines so that there is some order in which these issues are dealt with in our institution. These are available online and guide us in our interpretation of these rules (11). As with science and education, these policies will evolve and respond to issues over time. We do hope that the MCI can take note of these, and refine this circular further.

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