

Chapter 1

Why should a surgeon publish?

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'Writing was everything' **Alfred Kazin.**

For the majority of surgeons writing is not everything and some will not write at all during their career. Exhausted by attempts at alleviating suffering and the increasingly difficult tasks of bread-winning and administrative duties, most surgeons will leave writing for others. We know, however, that there are many surgeons 'out there' who are young and eager to write, but do not have the slightest idea how to begin. If you are an established academic surgeon, this book may not be for you.

This book is, however, aimed at surgeons who have that novel idea, observation or message waiting to be published but do not know the route leading to successful publication (and thereby dissemination) in the pages of a surgical journal. You wish to share a valuable experience with the rest of the surgical world but there is no one to guide you.

Some 'How to Write/Publish' books for scientists and medical professionals are available but to date none has ever been dedicated to surgeons. We intend to attempt to do this in each chapter of the book by providing insight into a range of different topics. We intend to be simple and brief, and to use practical examples from daily life. We sincerely hope that after reading this book you will be ready to write your own scientific or clinical surgical papers; not those that are regularly rejected but those that will be published in reputable journals.

Why should a surgeon publish?

'Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man and writing an exact man.' **Francis Bacon.**

The reasons for writing and publishing are both egoistic and altruistic (Table 1). Being altruistic may eventually influence your ego as well!

TABLE 1
Why should a surgeon publish?

| Egoistic motives | Altruistic motives |
|---|----------------------------|
| Academic promotion | Dissemination of knowledge |
| Professional promotion | Research selectivity* |
| Improve knowledge and judgement | |
| Being 'famous' | |
| Develop professional contacts | |
| Financial gain | |
| * <i>Research selectivity is the process of fund allocation on quality of research to Universities in the UK.</i> | |

Egoistic motives for writing and publishing

Academic promotion

The dictum of 'publish or perish' is still firmly entrenched in academia. It is difficult to climb the academic ladder without a certain number of papers on your curriculum vitae. To progress academically to whatever academic title you aspire, your published output must constantly grow in number and quality. Obviously publications are not the only key to promotion but, as Bulwer-Lytton said, 'The pen is mightier than the sword'. In some countries, the number and quality of publications (graded on where the paper was published and how many times it has been cited) have a direct influence on academic ascension.

Professional promotion

This commonly follows academic promotion and vice versa. Let us say you are a resident or registrar seeking a prestigious fellowship or additional training in a centre of excellence, then your chances of competing successfully may be much better if only two to four relatively minor papers decorate your curriculum vitae. The mere fact that you have written and published signals to your potential employers that you are a 'thinker', interested in what you do and eager to share your experience with others. It will also suggest that you will continue to contribute academically in your new position. Do understand that writing and publishing is not limited to the 'academic surgical world'. Excellent and pioneering papers were and still are produced by astute clinicians from the non-academic surgical community. Well published 'non-academic' surgeons are respected by their peers, and publications add stature to their personalities and professional respectability. Who will you tend to believe: the surgeon who has published her results in a respectable journal or the one who rises at a meeting and says, 'I did 100 such cases with excellent results but I simply never found time to write and publish'?

Improve knowledge and judgement

Most of the authors in this book will have separately published 100-200 articles each. Any such paper written and published, be it a case report or a prospective randomized trial, contributed to, and added depth to, knowledge and understanding of the topic around which the publication revolved. The process also widens and deepens your own acumen, and the more you know the better you can serve your patients and yourself. You will never forget a topic about which you have written. Horace said, 'The secret of good writing is sound judgement', but good writing also provides you with the judgement. It allows you to analyse what you did, reflect on it and do better the next time.

Being 'famous'

As John Kenneth Galbraith said, 'Authorship of any sort is a fantastic indulgence of the ego'. The satisfaction one feels seeing a name in print is human and so is the pleasure derived from being quoted by others. A well published surgeon soon becomes 'famous': not only a prophet in his home town but perhaps worldwide. You could be the best surgeon in town but only after your results are published will you also be recognized in the capital and beyond.

Don't we all want to be 'significant' in one way or another? As surgeons we achieve a certain measure of significance through healing. But the subjects we heal are temporary residents on earth. Publishing, if 'significant', may provide us with the sense of the much desired 'significant permanence'. Would anyone remember today the name of Rudolf Nissen had he not published? ¹ As Emerson wrote, 'He that writes to himself writes to an eternal public'.

Develop professional contacts

'The universal object of men of letters is reputation,' said John Adams. The more you write the greater will be your reputation, which in turn makes you attractive to people of reputation across the world. The international professional contacts which develop increase your perspective and ability to publish, and become the basis for further exchanges and improvement of the quality of your work. The Medical Club is truly international with no joining requirements and no membership fees. The bonds of international friendship through authorship and the medical profession are strong and enriching of life itself.

Financial gain

'Money, money, all is money! Could you write even a penny novelette without money to put heart in you?' wrote George Orwell.

This, however, is not exactly true for the writing surgeon. Promotion and fame, which come with 'being well published', may eventually help you to achieve a better-paid position. But practically speaking, the time spent writing, if dedicated to fee-paying clinical work, would be much more profitable. Satisfaction, however, cannot always be measured in currency!

Altruistic motives for writing and publishing

'You don't write because you want to say something; you write because you've something to say,' wrote Scot Fitzgerald. This is also the main reason for you to write - to share your finding, experience and thoughts with the surgical community. The main purpose of professional publishing is to disseminate knowledge. What exactly should be written and published are the subject of further chapters in this book. All we need to mention here is that surgeons have a certain degree of moral obligation to publish any significant novel observation, be it 'positive' or 'negative', a 'success' or 'failure'.

In some national academic settings, research output and quality are measured and these measures play upon the amount of resource given by government to the university or college. Your productivity therefore feeds directly on to the financial well-being of your institution. Such a model is the Research Assessment Exercise in the UK. In some institutes research productivity and publishing activity are measured, and will determine proportions of your salary.

The pressures to publish are sometimes inordinate. We would like to think that publishing misdemeanours are mainly due to these pressures. We acknowledge that other factors may play a part in this process which causes inconvenience, embarrassment and undue work in those searching catalogues or indices. Readers will have seen the firm stance taken by the *British Journal of Surgery (BJS)*, for example, on these issues and the editors of the *BJS* are committed members of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). We are pleased to publish the COPE guidelines which can be located in Appendix I.

Not everyone shares these sentiments and there are those who think that there are too many journals and too many 'non-significant' publications. Some suggest limiting surgical output to a few top journals, 'supplied' by top academicians ². We contend, however, that such a non-egalitarian publishing world, if ever allowed to prevail, would produce a false and biased image of surgical practice, and show surgery as practised in highly sophisticated ivory towers. That surgical writing should not only be limited to a few aristocrats is reflected today on the Internet, as more surgeons flock to its surgical sites in order to learn and share experience and knowledge ³. It appears obvious to us that many surgeons have something to say and there is a need to show them how to say it in peer-reviewed journals. We thought this task so important to deserve these precious pages into a full book publication; we know there are many of you across the world who always wanted to publish but did not know how. We hope this book will help you get started.

*'All you ever wanted to know about (publishing) but
never dared to ask' - modified from **Woody Allen!***

References

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Commentary
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A surgeon's guide to the world of publishing unquestionably has to start with reflections on motivations. The collection of egoistic and altruistic motives presented by the editors of this series seems almost complete and the expertise of the contributors is obvious, all of them having enriched the surgical literature. The reader may wonder whether it was the wish for increased reputation in the scientific community; the desire for personal satisfaction by writing to an 'eternal public'; or the pressure of a deeply felt moral obligation to disseminate knowledge and significant observations which served as the driving force behind such a tremendous amount of work.

In this context it may seem inadequate and cavilling to paraphrase the title by asking 'when (why) should a surgeon NOT publish'. However for those of us who have contributed relatively few ideas, observations, or messages to the field of written surgical evidence, some reflective thoughts may be appropriate.

For a surgeon, writing is not everything. Care for the patient, administrative duties, and teaching may indeed distract from proper research. The time spent at the writing desk may be too short to result in high quality articles. It has recently been suggested that as much as

half of the research surgeons undertake is misconceived¹. The common practice of granting publication of papers presented at regional meetings adds to a less than desirable overall quality of many surgical journals. As long as the publish or perish mentality prevails and impact factors matter, things will not change. But why should they change? To improve the bad reputation of surgical science? Or, even more important, to spare the precious time of fellow surgeons attracted by interesting titles or by keyword-search to articles the mediocrity of which may become disclosed only after reading the first few pages?

The responsibility remains with the authors. They have to assure the quality of submissions. Originality, importance, and scientific significance are the criteria to judge the value of an experience which one may want to share with the surgical community. Editors and reviewing peers may be of some help.

References

- 1 Horton R. Surgical research or comic opera: questions but few answers. *Lancet* 1996; 347: 984.

