Fellowship of the British Journal of Neurosurgery

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Of immediate relevance to the journal is that a significant number of manuscripts submitted to the British Journal of Neurosurgery are primarily authored by current or prospective neurosurgical trainees. Arguably, there has been an increase in the past decade of academic output of neurosurgical trainees (and surgical trainees in general). National neurosurgical selection is a highly competitive process[1] that uses academic output as a marker of achievement. Alongside the nature of a constantly evolving evidence base in neurosurgical practice this encourages applicants (and trainees) to write papers. Neurosurgical trainees going out of programme to pursue a PhD is increasingly common nowadays. Until recently an academic component existed as a requirement to obtain a Certificate of Completion of Training (CCT). From a speculative perspective this removal might inadvertently serve three purposes: a) to remove unnecessary pressure on trainees, b) that it does not improve the clinical aptitude of trainees and c) could potentially reduce the volume of research which is not of the highest standard. However, due to an increasing escalation of complexity of neurosurgical practice, innovation, technology and training, it is becoming even more important for trainees to have a rigorous understanding of evidence based medicine (EBM).

This increase in EBM creates a challenge for journal editors to ensure reviewers, irrespective of seniority, have been trained to a high standard which includes understanding well established criteria for judging manuscripts, e.g. STROBE statement for cohort studies, PRISMA guidelines for systematic reviews and meta-analysis and even basic rubric for case reports. Such an understanding upregulates basic integrity of manuscripts published, the quality of the academic concepts communicated and ensure that the ever-increasing complexity of EBM is on a firm foundation. This requires training reviewers, and simplicity requires training those coming into reviewing instead of re-educating those long in the tooth. The responsibility future journal editors' face cannot be underestimated as Kassirer JP (2001) makes clear in his editorial "Why Be a Medical Editor?"[2]. So, we heartily welcome Fellows of the British Journal of Neurosurgery.

The concept of the BJNS Fellowship is not novel. It is a fee-free educational experience, not a job, so is not a paid position. Other journals have also piloted well-trodden fellowship schemes, which involves actual work for the organisation (and in some actual contractual payment). These take time to build and organisations need a place to start. So, we simply started. This fellowship scheme is, therefore, an important step in ensuring that future reviewers of the British Journal of Neurosurgery are trained to the highest standard of review knowledge and begin to experience both editorial and business acumen. This involves a close working relationship to the current Editor in Chief.

In autumn 2022, an advert went out throughout the British neurosurgical community to recruit fellows for the BJNS. The current fellows were selected based on an MS Teams interview and have developed a close working relationship to the current Editor in Chief. These involve fortnightly meetings to discuss the current state of the journal – for example, publication backlogs, methods editors use to extract out duplicitous manuscripts for removal[3], objectives for being a fellow, exposure to the current publication backlog, suggesting mechanisms to reduce this, building a print issue using manuscripts accepted and developing initiative to ensure the continued survival of the fellowship scheme.

To widen the reach of the BJNS fellowship scheme, a proposal of an apprenticeship has become a realisation. The target recruits are neurosurgical registrars, particularly those intent on becoming academic neurosurgeons and those who have not had formal training or involvement in the peer-review process. For potential academic neurosurgeons, this presents a golden opportunity to learn from fellows who have displayed a commitment to academic medicine but more so a willingness to learn from an Editor in Chief on journal management. As it is academic neurosurgeons who shall be dedicating time to researching and developing significant future research themes, this opportunity could serve as a means to develop an understanding of how journals function, for aspiring academic neurosurgical trainees, especially as many journals are run by neurosurgeons having a significant interest in academic medicine.

This apprenticeship initiative will be a series of training days across a three-month period and includes a) an introduction to the peer review process, b) a mock peer review training, c) developing peer reviewer skills, d) supervision of reviewing BJNS

manuscripts and e) an overall appraisal of their peer review skills to equip them for independent practice at a standard that is high, robust and reproducible. The deadline was 13th January 2023 and ten apprentices were selected. Overall, this initiative shall train neurosurgical trainees on the principles and practice of peer review, provide structures and mentored transition into reviewing for BJNS and should ideally provide a more substantial UK neurosurgical reviewer body.

The current fellows are keen to develop and support mechanisms to reduce the backlog of accepted but not published manuscripts. This shall involve increasing the standard of papers accepted, e.g. rejecting more manuscripts, to ensure this backlog does not return. However, this is not merely about accepting good and rejecting bad articles but developing an awareness of editorial experiences that dictates how journals survive then thrive. Therefore, both fellows intend to develop a fuller understanding of the role and responsibilities of an Editor in Chief of a major neurosurgical journal. This includes a) optimising and maintaining stewardship of good science and integrity in neurosurgical research, b) ensuring the BJNS begins a trajectory of thriving as measured by impact factors and readership and c) developing a critical balance of available and manageable print pending articles.

Hopefully with this initiative and with further BJNS fellows to come for the experience, the BJNS in the next few years will have a cohort of personnel with both adequate experience and the initiative to lead the journal in the future.

References
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