

What We've Learned So Far: Piloting a Publications Officer

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Summary Points

- Widespread deficiencies in the reporting quality of biomedical research severely limit the usability of findings.
- Introducing institutional Publications Officers who provide training and outreach on how to write clearly and completely, and advise on publication topics (open access, metrics, ethics and integrity) could help resolve reporting deficiencies.
- Here we describe our experience piloting the Publications Officer role and our planned monitoring framework.

Concerns about deficiencies in the reporting quality of biomedical research have been expressed for more than three decades¹. In spite of this, studies continue to pass through editorial and peer-review to be published with critical aspects of their methods and results missing. Publication bias and selective reporting of statistically positive results also remain problematic²⁻⁷. Together these practices limit research translation and transparency and hinder reproducibility efforts. In an attempt to alleviate these problems, Moher and Altman recently proposed four potential contributory actions for journals and educational institutes to consider⁸. Here, we present a description of our efforts to implement their first proposed action: the introduction of a Publications Officer.

The Role of the Publications Officer

The primary objective of a Publications Officer is to provide institutional guidance and support to researchers and trainees on how to prepare manuscripts for journal submission⁸. At present, formal training on how to write biomedical manuscripts is largely absent from universities and research institutions. Where such training does exist, it tends to be informal and may not be evidence based. Moreover, existing training courses on academic integrity typically omit discussion of publication integrity and ethics, or how to report research adequately, both

of which are essential responsibilities for authors. This situation is inadequate and lack of training on these topics may be partially to blame for the reporting weaknesses outlined above. The introduction of Publications Officers may represent a meaningful institutional investment to fill an important gap in support services at the back end of research.

Piloting the Publications Officer role

We are piloting the Publications Officer role at our institution, The Ottawa Hospital Research Institute (OHRI) and the neighboring Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario Research Institute (CHEO RI). We are fortunate that these institutions recognize the problems with biomedical reporting, and seek to be innovators in developing solutions in this area. Against this background, it is perhaps unsurprising that our experience piloting the Publications Officer role has largely been positive. Discussions with research chairs and other relevant leadership have shown that the needs do not vary considerably between the institutions. We have perceived a genuine appetite in both institutions for publications outreach, with particular interest noted in topics including authorship policies, predatory journals, peer review, and guidance on selecting a journal for manuscript submission.

Anecdotally there appears to be support from discipline research chairs across both institutions in acknowledging the relevance of this type of service. Interestingly, on occasion, there has been some lack of clarity in regards to the scope of the Publications Officer position. Our impression is that several senior scientists felt the services the Publications Officer could offer would be great for graduate students and researchers early on in their career development; however, they were more resistant to the perceived impact it could have among senior researchers. It is hoped that through targeted seminars (e.g., speaking at senior scientist retreats) we will be able to reach broad levels of researchers within our institutions. Finally, concerning the practicalities of providing outreach, at least within the two organizations we are working, we have found that the lag period between hiring the Publications Officer and initiating outreach services has been critical to understand institutional structures, establish relationships, build interest, and schedule outreach seminars.

Monitoring the impact of the Publications Officer

We have a monitoring framework in place to assess the value of the Publications Officer position. Specifically, we are conducting a baseline self-report survey of researchers at our

two institutions, and three comparable local control institutions, to assay existing knowledge and perceptions of publication practices. Following this, the Publications Officer will provide publications outreach within the two institutions for approximately 6 months. This will include maintaining a webpage of journalology resources (<http://www.ohri.ca/journalology>), developing a manuscript pre-submission peer-review network, providing a series of targeted seminars (e.g., How to peer review), and encouraging one-on-one meetings to discuss publication questions or concerns. We will subsequently re-survey researchers at each site, to determine what impact the Publications Officer has had. As the role is a new one, we look will report and track changes over the long-term so that we can evolve the position to best serve researchers. Introducing Publications Officers, if effective, may be one way that research institutions can do their part to contribute to improving the biomedical literature. Unquestionably, new models and options to incentivize transparent reporting will need to be explored in tandem with the introduction of this role.

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