

INVITED EDITORIAL

On the sustainability and visibility of medical student journals

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Introduction

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the New Zealand Medical Student Journal (NZMSJ), and what a momentous achievement that is! I would like to congratulate the Journal's editorial staff, contributors, and supporting institutions and academic staff for their efforts in achieving this significant milestone.

It was only by chance that I found out about the possibility of writing for the Journal many years ago as a then-second-year medical student. After months spent agonising over retrieving and reviewing the literature and writing a review article, I finally summoned the courage to submit it. After what felt like an eternity, the editor's decision was in: accept with major changes. Although addressing the reviewers' comments felt arduous, the exhilaration of becoming a published student-author was intoxicating.

My journey as a researcher began with the NZMSJ! As I reflect on this now, two interlinking themes emerge in my mind. First, medical student journals (MSJ) face significant (often unseen) obstacles in remaining a viable endeavour. Second, assuming the journal stands the test of time, its content may not necessarily be visible to the wider audience consuming the medical literature.

Sustainability of MSJs

Medical student-led publishing has existed for over a century.^{2,3} A significant number of MSJs commonly cease to exist after a (frequently short) number of years following their inauguration. For example, we have previously found that several MSJs faced demise following a median of 4 years (range, 2–18) after launching.³ Other MSJs commonly falter in their progress and either attempt one or several re-launches (of varying long-term success) or eventually become incorporated within a mainstream 'parent' journal. Only a handful of MSJs stand the test of time, and continue to exist years or decades after launching.

The reason behind the short-lived fate of most MSJs remains undefined. It could reflect a multitude of factors, including the usually high turnover of editorial staff,² fading interests among medical students (as editorial staff, and as contributing authors), lack of senior academic and financial support, and a relative absence of collaboration among MSJs (Figure 1).

Furthermore, negative attitudes (by established researchers) towards student-run journals may adversely impact their survivorship. For instance, it has been previously argued that if research findings were "good enough", they should be published in a "real journal".⁴ Moreover, MSJs may be viewed as a 'last resort' or inferior destination to which manuscripts are submitted. Editors of one MSJ have inferred this from the long lag between data collection and manuscript submission to their journal.⁵ They suggested that MSJs are often viewed as a safe backup option after the manuscript has been rejected by 'prestigious' journals.⁵

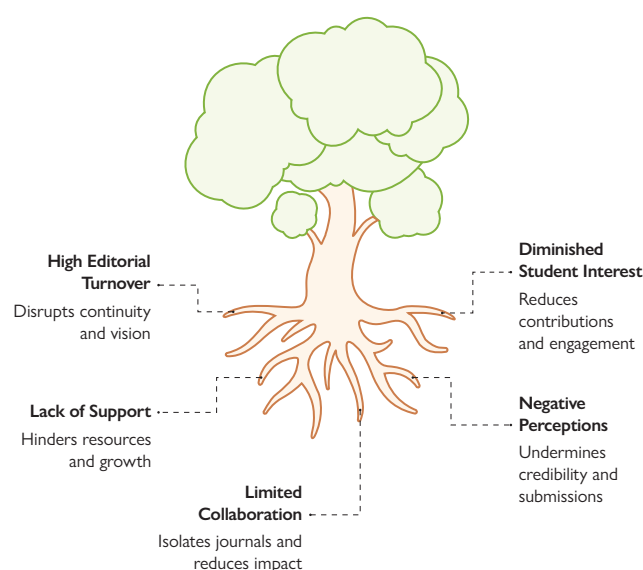


Figure 1: Sustainability challenges of medical student journals.

Visibility of MSJ content

Another issue that faces MSJ is the somewhat limited visibility compared with mainstream medical journals. Our previous literature search only found a single MSJ to be indexed by PubMed.⁶ More recently, another study found that only a minority (15%) of student-led journals in Canada were indexed in at least one of seven online databases.⁷ Therefore, the content of MSJs (regardless of views on its quality) is poorly visible to the majority of consumers of the medical literature. And therein lies a paradox: despite being open-access and easily accessible electronically, MSJ content is still not being seen.

To date, there are no specific databases dedicated to highlighting medical student research and publications. In fact, several scholarly indexes place limitations on student-run journals. For example, Érudit (a Canadian-based platform which showcases publications in the humanities and social sciences) does not generally index student journals.⁷ Other databases, such as the Directory of Open Access Journals, have specific requirements for a student journal to be indexed.⁸ Finally, some databases (e.g., PubMed) state that they are "very selective" about indexing student journals without divulging specific criteria.⁹

This lack of 'discoverability' not only limits an MSJ's readership (i.e., if it cannot be seen, it cannot be read), but also likely prevents potential submissions, lessens the journal's reach and impact, dissuades funders, and is disheartening for student-authors to see their published work not be referenced or acknowledged. Additionally, the lack of inclusion in indexing databases may cast doubt on the credibility and legitimacy of research published in MSJ—both by editorial staff, as well as readers.⁷

Solutions and the way forward

Running a successful MSJ is a challenging feat, and we must acknowledge it as such. Student editors are less likely to be experienced (compared with established scientists and researchers), and their editorial time is often in competition with their coursework and other extra-curricular activities. Academic (and pastoral) support from seasoned academics and clinicians is likely to go a long way. Backing from academic institutions not only provides credibility but also offers associated financial support, helping to alleviate the cognitive burden of having to worry about the costs associated with running an MSJ.

It is imperative to highlight that MSJs need not exist in silos. Collaboration among editorial members of like-minded MSJs is expected to be beneficial for all involved. Advantages of this collaborative work may include the exchange of ideas, contacts, and resources, raising their MSJ profiles as a collective, and discussing emerging issues affecting MSJ and their readerships.²

Several avenues may be explored to address the issue of poor content visibility. The stringent inclusion process and criteria of some indexing databases limit their feasibility as platforms for MSJ. An alternative to this obstacle would be a collaborative approach with other MSJs to create an inclusive and easily referenced 'online presence' for medical student research. Verma and colleagues have suggested to create a list of all medical student journals as a first step.²

Awareness of the requirements of search engine inclusion is also likely to enhance an MSJ's discoverability. For example, the web platform used by an MSJ has direct implications on whether it appears as a 'hit' on search engines.⁷ Finally, editors of MSJ may also choose to pursue novel avenues to promote their journals, including the use of social media, a journal's website, targeted emails within a university,⁷ and invited communications from training colleges and professional entities.

Conclusions

The NZMSJ has achieved a significant milestone—one which the majority of MSJs cannot claim. Future efforts of the Journal ought to focus on two, mutually inclusive challenges: its sustainability as a stand-alone MSJ (so long as this allows the editorial team to achieve the Journal's mission) and enhancing the visibility of its content. Continuing to encourage and support medical student authors (especially from New Zealand) to contribute to the Journal will ensure it remains a relevant and viable avenue for medical student research. Similarly, enhancing the visibility of the Journal's content will not only validate its authors, but will also expose local, student-led research to a wide international audience of readers. Collaboration with other MSJs (e.g., the Australian Medical Student Journal) will likely be a worthwhile endeavour for both parties in expanding their readerships, learning from each other's mistakes, and strengthening the presence of MSJs in Australasia and internationally. A strong academic presence, better content visibility, easier Journal discoverability, and higher quality submissions will likely follow in a harmonious, virtuous cycle.

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About the author

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