

Mr. William Summerskill: editor's role to act as the bridge between the health and society

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Annals of Translational Medicine (ATM) was much honored to have the chance to interview Mr. William Summerskill, the Senior Executive Editor at *The Lancet*, in the 2014 Chinese Heart Congress. Mr. Summerskill has more than 100 publications in peer-review journals and acquired several qualifications from Royal Colleges, such as Diploma of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (DRCOG) and Member of the Royal College of General Practitioners (MRCGP). During the interview, Mr. Summerskill shared with us his profound ideas about medical writing and publication (Figure 1).

ATM: *What's the take-home message from your speech on "How to strengthen your submission to medical journal"?*

Mr. Summerskill: I think my topic this morning wasn't about the mechanism of writing a paper. Because of the experience of the audience it was looking at ways that make submissions more competitive. And as an editor, I often see submissions that could be strengthened if the abstract was more clearly written and more thought put into the choice of the journal or the cover letter was stronger. So there were three things I am talking about the "ABC" in publications, the abstract, the best journal, and the cover letter.

ATM: *With your rich experience in the medical publishing field, can you tell us what role does editor play in the field of medicine from your point of view?*

Mr. Summerskill: I guess we are looking at two parts for that: one is the role of journals; the other is the role of editors. I personally feel strongly that journals should have a role in society. And the role of a journal or the editor's work for a journal isn't just a passive role to publish research. We need to be engaged both with the research community about improving the quality of reporting of research and with the society as a whole in setting the health agenda. We need to be aware of what is important in society, what are the health needs of a society because health and society



Figure 1 Mr. William Summerskill (left) and ATM editor.

are bound together: the type of health system, investments in research. I think editors have a role to act as the bridge between the two domains so journals can be a platform for debate and better understanding.

ATM: *What criteria in your opinion for high-quality clinical report?*

Mr. Summerskill: Well, I think it could be any kind of research. The most important thing is getting the question right. If a really good research question is answered properly, that can lead to an article with wide interest, which could either generate further hypotheses or further research. Particularly special is an article that can actually change clinical thinking, or change practice. All depends on a good question answered well.

ATM: *Would you like to share with us your story as an editor, anything interesting and unforgettable?*

Mr. Summerskill: I think one of my striking experiences was in 2007, when I first came to China and I was visiting a

military hospital. I went into the research labs and there was a notice on the wall of the lab written in English, which said "No Chinese is speaking, please". It was explained to me by the Chinese head of the lab that if the English was the language of science, then people working in the research labs should speak English when they were in the lab. And that struck me, because it showed such commitment to science and publication. It was obvious that China was destined to be a leader in research. When I came back from that trip to England, I said to my colleagues that we needed to open an office in China. China is where things are happening and we need to be there. I was very pleased that *The Lancet* was the first international general medical journal with a full-time office here. We have an excellent Asia editor in Dr. Helena Wang and now have two editors working in China. In the London office, we also have a Chinese-born editor. So I think it reflects the reality of research in the current age: that medical journals and journals of science need to be actively engaged in China to publish the best research. For me, that little message written on the wall of the lab made me realize that how serious China was about being a world leader in science research. With that kind of seriousness, anything can be achieved.

ATM: What are your comments on the overall quality of papers from China?

Mr. Summerskill: The overall quality of writing is excellent. I think it is very important that authors shouldn't worry too much about the language as long as we can understand what research was done and appreciate the findings and the ideas that went into it, and the conclusions

that were drawn. We work with all our authors that have an accepted paper to rewrite it in the required house style. So for us, writing isn't the problem. I appreciate that *The Lancet* is fortunate to receive the highest level of research submissions. And in other instances, writing may be more than an issue. But I certainly wouldn't want anyone to feel it's necessary to have English polishing before submission. I would feel embarrassed if they would do that.

ATM: What would be your advice for Chinese doctors in writing?

Mr. Summerskill: I think here again it comes down to getting the question right. We are seeing an evolution of research questions in China, so that the research is moving from being confirmatory to being more original and challenging. That's the kind of research that is going to make the transformation to get the eyes of the world turning to Chinese research; research questions that address problems that are faced by the world and provide solid answers that can be transferable to other settings. So I guess we need to think broadly about these research questions, being bold in what you are asking and putting it in an international context.

ATM: Thank you very much for your informative talk!

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