

Editorial

The Journey to Scopus

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International indexation is not easy for a medical journal from Pakistan.¹ It demands immense effort from the editorial team in the struggle to maintain authorship diversity and quality editorial standards, alongside facing rejections along the way. For years, our story at the *Journal of Rawalpindi Medical College* was no different. Established in 1997 as the official peer-reviewed publication of Rawalpindi Medical College, it operated like many other public sector medical journals due to limited resources and a lack of dedicated staff² i.e. publishing steady and reliable local research but always struggling to make an impact in terms of citations and indexation.

Due to the efforts of previous editors, the journal had a rich archive as a result of over three decades of continuous publication, transitioning from a biannual to a quarterly schedule in 2014 and publishing over 1,800 research articles. This included 1,600+ original research articles, 90+ case reports, and 30+ reviews. Today, our Open Journal Systems-based online platform contains 75 issues published across 28 volumes. Despite publishing a volume of manuscripts, we realized that quantity does not automatically translate to global visibility or indexation. Getting into Scopus still felt like a struggle.

After receiving our first rejection in 2019, the editorial team, under the able guidance of the leadership of Rawalpindi Medical University, started working on understanding the international indexation requirements and implementing them in the policies and processes of the journal. It was through the strategic vision of Prof. Dr. Muhammad Umar, former Vice Chancellor of Rawalpindi Medical University, and Prof. Muhammad Khurram, current Principal and Editor-in-Chief of the journal, as well as the dedicated operational execution by Dr. Arsalan Manzoor Mughal, current Editor, and full-time editorial managers Dr. Javeria Tariq and Mr. Raza Kazmi, that we were able to achieve the milestone of Scopus indexation in November 2025.

Today, we are proud to report that the *Journal of Rawalpindi Medical College* holds a 2025 CiteScore of 0.2, a SCImago Journal Rank (SJR) of 0.117, and a Source Normalized Impact per Paper (SNIP) of 0.099. This places the journal among the top 50% of global publications in its domain according to the Scopus release, demonstrating a steady rise with 112 total citations and an H-index of 4.

We share this experience to demystify the process for other editorial boards, and we hope that our experience is helpful for other medical journals in Pakistan.

Why Do So Many Regional Journals Fail?

The requirements of the Scopus Content Selection and Advisory Board (CSAB) are very strict. A review of literature from Pakistani medical researchers highlights these challenges:³

1. Lack of Authorship Diversity: Papers published in the *Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences* frequently cite high institutional authorship as a primary reason for rejection. Scopus demands regional and international diversity. When we gathered our data, we realized that 80% of JRMC's published articles came from our own institution. By actively expanding our outreach, we successfully reduced institutional authorship to just under 30% over six years through submissions from our Pakistani and international collaborators.

2. Discouraging Low-Impact Studies: Literature shows that many Pakistani medical journals are saturated with low-impact Knowledge, Attitude, and Practice (KAP) surveys and simple descriptive cross-sectional studies.⁴ While these surveys hold local public health value, most authors prefer them especially for promotions as they are quick, feasible, and can be conducted without a team of experts such as epidemiologists and statisticians. Because they sit low on the evidence pyramid and lack analytical weight, they rarely attract citations, which is one of the key benchmarks that Scopus uses for journal evaluation.

3. Poor Metadata and Digital Infrastructure: Global databases cannot index and calculate the impact of a research article when the metadata in the Open Journal Systems is not properly added. Metadata is structured, machine-readable, and standardized information that describes, identifies, and contextualizes an article, along with its details such as the abstract, author names, Open Researcher and Contributor IDs (ORCID),

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unique digital object identifiers (DOIs), keyword registries, and specific journal details such as the ISSN, title, volume, issue, and page number.

Recent critiques of Pakistani journals note that a weak digital presence, inactive editorial boards, and the lack of DOIs and metadata are routine grounds for failure to get indexed.²

4. Ethical Lapses and Opaque Peer Review: Global indexing agencies are continually struggling to weed out journals that act as paper mills, publishing articles that are plagiarized or contain gift/ghost authorships.^{3,5} A lack of documentation and evidence regarding the implementation of policies aligned with international standards set by the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME), the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), and others often leads to failure at the initial Scopus desk review.³

Here is how we addressed these issues:

Lesson 1: Drafting and Enforcing Comprehensive Editorial Policies: To ensure transparency and accountability according to international standards of editorial practice, we completely overhauled our operations by developing an “Editorial Policies” document in alignment with WAME and COPE standards, including:

- **Authorship and Data Sharing:** We ensured strict adherence to all four ICMJE criteria, capped authorship at six contributors per manuscript, outlined clear protocols for handling authorship disputes, and required mandatory data-sharing.^{5,6}
- **Research and Publication Ethics:** We mandated the enforcement of the Declaration of Helsinki, explicit patient consent rules, and guidelines for handling research misconduct.
- **Post-Publication Corrections:** We drafted an Article Correction, Retraction, and Removal Policy based on COPE guidelines, explicitly detailing when our editors will issue Errata, Corrigenda, Expressions of Concern, or full Retractions.
- **Business Transparency and DEI:** We published clear declarations of our open-access funding model and copyright framework, refused to accept commercial advertising, and implemented a comprehensive Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policy ensuring non-discriminatory editorial decisions.
- **Appeals and Complaints:** We formalized an Editorial Decision Appeals Policy and a Complaint & Misconduct Policy. We also established an independent Ombudsman role to investigate unresolved grievances.
- **Artificial Intelligence:** We introduced an AI policy stating that AI chatbots cannot be authors, requiring authors to disclose AI usage, and prohibiting peer reviewers from uploading manuscripts into online generative AI systems.⁷

Lesson 2: Publishing Quality Manuscripts: We developed policies to discourage and reject simple descriptive cross-sectional studies unless they addressed a highly novel gap, simultaneously prioritizing analytical designs such as randomized controlled trials (RCTs), cohort studies, and case-control studies.⁴

Rather than relying only on external peer review, we improved our internal editorial triage to ensure that we publish only quality manuscripts. We implemented a structured four-stage editorial review workflow leveraging editorial board oversight alongside structured evaluation checklists for our Journal Manager, Statistician, and Section Editors.⁸ This ensured statistical validity and methodological rigor before a manuscript ever reached peer review, successfully increasing our rejection rate from 10% to 45%.

Lesson 3: Expanding Our Editorial Board and Author Base: A journal is only as strong as its board. Rather than building a passive, nominal board, we restructured our governance by reaching out to and appointing 116 active national and international research experts who collectively boast 118,098 citations and a combined H-index of 1,046. We established a 31-member International Editorial Advisory Board with highly cited experts from the Americas, Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Australia, and Africa. Locally, our 65-member National Research Advisory Board ensures representation from all five provinces and territories of Pakistan.

This was made possible by partnering with diaspora organizations like APPNA (North America), RMCAANA, APPNE (Northern Europe), and ANZAPP (Australia/New Zealand) to attract international reviewers and authors.

Lesson 4: Building a Digital Infrastructure: As described earlier, international indexation is not possible without complete digitization. We transitioned fully to the Open Journal Systems (OJS) platform, tracking every step of our double-blind review process. In March 2020, we joined CrossRef to assign DOIs to all articles, ensuring permanent citation linking. We secured open-access indexing in the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) in October 2020 and established long-term preservation with PORTICO in June 2020. By September 2024, we made ORCID iDs mandatory for all authors so that the correct metadata can be used by international databases for the calculation of citations and impact.

Lesson 5: Integrating the Journal into the University's Research Ecosystem: The upgradation of Rawalpindi Medical College (RMC) to Rawalpindi Medical University (RMU) in May 2017 presented a unique opportunity for the journal.

The working and success of the journal became an organic part of RMU's research ecosystem.² By aligning our standards directly with the university's research inception phases, we integrated our operations with the university's Research & Development (R&D) Department, Clinical Trials Unit (CTU), and Patient Data Centre. Our editorial board members also sit on the university's Ethical Review Board and Board of Advanced Studies and Research (BASAR), ensuring that researchers design methodologically sound studies from day one. Together with R&D, we started conducting workshops on biostatistics, SPSS, and medical writing for Masters and PhD fellows. To cater to this diverse cohort of researchers, we launched specialized publications, including a Resident Supplement and a Student Supplement, creating a sustainable pipeline of well-trained authors. In order to cater to the limited number of publications in Allied Health Sciences, a new *Journal of Nursing and Allied Health (JNAH)* was started, which is now recognized by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan.

The Road Ahead: For success, the mindset of the editorial team is very important. We recommend that journal management teams keep themselves updated with the latest international editorial policies and continue evolving their systems accordingly.³ Also, they should not stop applying to international indexation organizations out of a fear of rejection, as every setback should be taken positively as an opportunity to improve. Psychological safety and support must be provided by the institution's administration to the editorial team during this journey. Likewise, every success should be celebrated, as it gives the team an opportunity to work harder and achieve more.

Achieving Scopus indexation is not the finish line, but a stepping stone. Our next milestones are Web of Science and PubMed. By sharing our journey, we hope to foster a collaborative ecosystem where Pakistani medical journals elevate one another, ultimately putting our regional clinical research on the global map. We hope and pray for success.

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