Public health journals in own languages: an endangered species?

English, has become the universal language for science. A new generation across Europe grows up with English taught in schools, and global television networks and songs provide an ubiquitous sound-background. The few scientists who were professionally advantaged by speaking English, and the many who laboured to learn the language during their careers, are succeeded by colleagues for whom English as a second language is their natural means of international communication.

English is the first language now because the USA leads the world in science and technology. (Chinese may become that language in the future, as German, French and Latin have been in the past.) The use of a single language facilitates rapid communication, especially when information must be passed on relatively quickly in the medical field. But English is not yet the daily language of scientists across Europe. Professional practice—especially contact with the public—continues to need good own-language skills.

Generally speaking, there are both cultural and commercial reasons that drive authors and publishers to want to publish in the English language. From a cultural point of view, scientific researchers wish to gain visibility and the affirmation of a clearly defined scientific identity at the national and above all, international level. For this reason they generally prefer to publish their articles in English. On the other hand, from a commercial point of view, publishers wish for each of their own journals to become a point of reference, at the national, and above all, international level. For this reason they generally prefer to publish their articles in English. On the other hand, from a commercial point of view, publishers wish for each of their own journals to become a point of reference, internationally, for researchers and professionals working in the specific sector of expertise of the journal.

Yet each European country has a public health tradition based on science, scholarship and social action. Scientific journals have a long tradition, reporting the proceedings of science meetings as well as publishing original papers, and in most countries this has developed as a national public health journal. It is more natural to read in one's own language, if that is not English, and most people prefer it.

We reflect here on public health journals published in two European countries, Italy and the United Kingdom.

Italy

The Italian language journal Igiene e Sanità Pubblica (‘Hygiene and Public Health’) is published by the Italian Society for Hygiene, Preventive Medicine and Public Health. The circulation is supported exclusively through personal subscriptions, and rarely receives funds from scientific institutions; so far, the journal has not felt the need to pursue a commercial direction. Each issue contains an editorial, a scientific section (with original research articles), and sections containing updates and in-depth reviews of specific arguments. There are also occasional articles on the history of public health, and translated documents, for example, from the World Health Organization and the British National Health Service, adapting them to the Italian situation.

Since the first issue, over 50 years ago, the journal has published abstracts in four languages (Italian, English, French and German); in a few cases original research articles have been published entirely in English. This ensures that the contents of the article are immediately accessible to all. Also, each issue has an editorial, in both Italian and English, which analyses and comments on important, current problems in public health. An extensive bibliography accompanies each editorial, allowing readers to stay up to date with the international literature in the specific topic of the editorial. Publishing abstracts and key words in English and in other languages both assures the continuation of Italian language and also allows articles to be accessible on the internet, through the US National Library of Medicine database (MEDLINE) and at http://www.igiennesanita.org and http://www.igiene.org.

The editors consider there are three reasons for continuing to publish the journal in Italian.

Although there has not been a detailed survey on the readership, the journal seeks to address two main audiences: public health practitioners, who make up the majority, and researchers from various institutions including the Ministry of Health, universities and other public health agencies. Researchers are well used to reading articles in English, and to using English terminology. By contrast, public health practitioners access the international literature less frequently, and are more comfortable with Italian language articles.

The second reason is that many public health topics (and, therefore, the contents of the journal) are multidisciplinary. Besides highly scientific articles including original research, there are many articles with political, social and economic content; that is to say, of a ‘humanistic’ nature. The editors believe it essential to distinguish between the real and unquestionable need for practicality in communication at a high scientific level and the unjustified use of the English language in contexts and fields of knowledge where this is not required.

The third reason is the traditional tendency of the journal to give a lot of space to public health practitioners (the journal was originally the official journal of state-employed public health physicians). The editors do not wish to neglect the importance of stimulating public health practitioners to publish articles about their activities and experiences. These, however, are much more meaningful at the local level than at the international level.

It is of interest that a new journal, the Italian Journal of Public Health, with material in the English language, has recently been launched. It is likely to carry public health reports both from Italy and also broadly across Europe. The website is http://www.IJPH.it

United Kingdom

The Journal of Public Health is published four times a year in the United Kingdom through a commercial publisher, Oxford University Press. While written in English, the journal is essentially national: in the March 2005 issue, there were 19 articles from the UK and one each from four other English-speaking countries: Canada, Papua-New Guinea, Pakistan and USA. The journal was created 30 years ago as the scientific journal of the UK Faculty of Public Health (a professional association), whose members still receive it free as part of their annual subscription. It was formerly the Journal of Public Health Medicine, and now includes articles across health promotion, health service, epidemiology and health protection that are relevant to public health practice within the UK National Health Service.

The journal has the explicit aim ‘to promote high standards of public health
practice by publishing readable papers of high scientific quality. Most of the journal’s publications are original research reports. The text is laid out in two columns, facilitating diagrams and tables, and most papers have a statistical basis. Authors’ disciplines are described, and include academic general practitioners, service public health practitioners and statisticians, as well as academic public health scientists. There is a regular report on communicable disease control in the UK, written by the English Health Protection Agency, but not a regular report on non-communicable disease control. There is a single opinion-style editorial, a correspondence section referring to science in previous published papers and an occasional book review. There is no news section, as this function is covered directly by the newsletter sent by the Faculty to its members. The journal is abstracted on MEDLINE, and on the internet (http://jpubhealth.oupjournals.org). Advanced access electronic publication has recently been introduced.

While the Journal of Public Health has an essentially national perspective, it can be contrasted with the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health (once called the Journal of Preventive Medicine), which has grown into a more international journal. This is a specialist journal within the BMJ Publishing Group, with international editors and editorial board. A majority of the research papers present epidemiological data, about half from the UK, and there is less applied research on health services. The journal seeks to lighten its tone through occasional articles and pictures (something peppered through the text), as well as editorials, letters and book reviews. The journal is abstracted on MEDLINE and is available on the internet (http://jehc.bmjournals.com).

Discussion

The title of this paper is more rhetorical than combative: there is evidently a place for own-language journals, and for local journals where English is the first language. In addition, there are differences in the use of journals, from referring to data to reading commentaries. If the purpose of communication is to be read, especially to inform the practitioner, then own language will be the preferred method. Publication in English, or at least an abstract in English, will be better for scientific papers where the findings are applicable internationally.

In the future, three factors may push Igiene e Sanità Pubblica towards being entirely written and published in English: younger generations (and therefore younger public health practitioners) will have a better knowledge of English; there may be significant increases in English-language technical jargon (so-called ‘medic-speak’); and greater use of internet allowing others more readily to access the journal (it is currently planned for the journal to be published on-line simultaneously with the printed edition). If these all occur, then Italian-language public health journals may become endangered.

Working within one language limits scientists to local thoughts unless key papers or summaries are translated from other languages. Yet, while English has a natural advantage, with so many publications in this language, it would be unfortunate for ideas to flow only in one direction. There is a need both for own-language journals to provide English translations of abstracts, and also for interlocutors to spread understanding of local practice, that is described only in own language, to the wider world. Yet finally, just as European research conferences and research consortia are now almost all conducted in English, public health and epidemiological comparisons will also have to be through the English language, even when not involving English native speakers. While a journal speaks to its readers in one direction, European collaborative research will depend on speaking a common language.

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