In this brief essay, which is meant to be provocative rather than substantive, and which we hope will lead to further discussions at this conference and beyond, we will first describe some problems in biomedical journalism that developing countries are facing. Then, we will touch upon the ways through which, we believe these countries might succeed in biomedical journalism. We will end with some suggestions and comments.

Scientific journals are the major medium of exchange and dissemination of scientific information. Nonetheless, 90% of relevant information is published in only 10% of the journals, the mainstream journals. Although, developing countries encompass 80% of the world’s population and account for approximately 25% of the world’s scientists, all the mainstream journals are published in developed nations. The roughly 2% participation in the international scientific discourse allowed by Western indexing services is simply too little to account for the scientific output of 80% of the world. Considering the current situation, before dealing with the title question, we would like to raise a more basic question; namely, “does the world need a journal from a developing country?” Jerome P. Kassirer, the former Editor-in-Chief of the New England Journal of Medicine, answered “NO.” He suggested that “developing countries should receive guidance on nutrition and immunization before getting advice on medical editing.” He added, “very poor countries have much more to worry about than doing high-quality research.” He said, “there is no science there.” Such people believe that if, hardly ever, anything significant is discovered in a developing country, it can be published in mainstream journals. Thanks to improved health standards, many infectious diseases have been almost completely eradicated in some industrialized countries and are being replaced by cardio- and cerebrovascular diseases. This tendency is evident if one compares today’s medical texts to those belonging to a few decades ago. The advancement in technology and the use of high-tech devices also accelerates this transition and increases the already-existing scientific gradient between industrialized and developing countries. In developing countries, however, infectious diseases such as diarrhea are still among the major killers. Therefore, physicians practicing in third world countries are faced with situations far different from those encountered by practitioners in industrialized countries. We believe, this duality, indeed, makes a strong argument for third world countries to present their own somewhat different and new medical findings, and this in turn necessitates the publication of their own medical journals. Therefore, a reasonable answer to the former question can be “YES. The world might need a journal from a developing country, if it will be of high-quality.”

But, what should be the aim and scope (vision and mission) of such a small journal that is looking for an appropriate position in the world literature? Every day hundreds of medical journals are published and disseminated worldwide. We believe, to seek an appropriate position, we should have something new to say. Considering the restricted equipment and limited research budgets in many third world countries, competing in those fields of research that are very well funded and are already under intensive research by scientists working in industrialized countries, will be fighting on an uphill battle, and duplicity of such research is both futile and a waste of limited resources. Research on locally prevalent diseases, however, seems to be a more reasonable approach. Therefore, one way to succeed is probably to insist on geographic medicine.

Thanks to the new inexpensive desktop publishing technology, many developing countries have had a publishing boom with the launch of many new biomedical journals in the past decade. All these small journals, old and new, however, should compete for a limited number of manuscripts and funds. These
limitations certainly might hamper the quality of such journals.

Another problem arises from a self-diminishing mechanism that affects most of the small journals: To become a high-quality journal, it should publish high-quality research. The authors of high-quality research, however, would rather publish their work in high-impact mainstream journals. The publication of low-quality articles results in low credibility and limited international interest that translates into very little chance for being covered by international indexing systems. Not being indexed along with small circulation of the small journals results in low visibility; almost no one is aware of their existence. This results in low submission rate of high-quality research articles and this completes the vicious circle of inadequacy. A journal that entered this downward spiral to death will eventually reach an ominous state; although it is published, it has almost no contribution to the science world, hence, a dead brain journal.

Another problem is the language barrier. To gain international acceptance, articles to be published are usually required to be written in English, which is a problem for most authors whose mother tongue is not English. Nonetheless, English has not always enjoyed its present status. In ancient times, Greek, Latin, and Arabic have played such a role. This change in scientific language from Greek, Latin and Arabic into English, is a reflection of a shift in research centers from ancient Eastern countries to Western countries-\textit{ex vivo oriente}.

Perhaps, one practical way to face part of the aforementioned problems is to put our limited resources into only a few journals. The journals may be united to develop a new journal with better personnel and equipment. In this way, we may prevent too many journals chasing too few funds and manuscripts. Meanwhile, we can help potential authors to develop their manuscripts through a pre-peer review mechanism into more acceptable forms. The same thing might be true to assist authors in better English writing. We might also nurture our future author’s pool by implementing courses on research methodology and scientific writing for medical students.

Looking for good reliable peer reviewers should be always on our agenda. Such good referees or authors might be found in conferences and scientific gatherings. We have to update our referee’s pool regularly. To check the viability of our journal, we should put it across our readers. We have to periodically perform a readership survey and change our journal, accordingly, to keep it alive; change or perish.

To break the vicious circle of inadequacy, we have to try to come out of the shadow and become visible. Thanks to the Internet and eJournalism, for any journal, it is now possible to become somewhat visible, if it could not be through the international indexing systems. Nowadays, many researchers, as part of their literature review, use a number of well-known search engines (for example Google, Yahoo, and so forth) that fortunately cover most journal websites. This particularly facilitates visibility if the journal website offers free access to the full text of articles.

To become successful, you have to set some goals, set deadlines and keep them carefully.

References