



## Life as an editor: developing a domestic journal to an international journal

Dae-Myung Jue

Department of Biochemistry, The Catholic University of Korea College of Medicine, Seoul, Korea

### Introduction

“Our policy is not to spend money on subscriptions to Korean domestic journals,” the director of the library of the medical college where I worked as an assistant professor said on the other end of the phone. It was 1995, and the managing committee of the Korean Society for Medical Biochemistry and Molecular Biology (KSMBMB) had decided to request medical libraries in Korea to purchase a subscription to our society’s official journal.

In that year, the society decided to rename our official journal from the *Korean Journal of Biochemistry* (KJB) to *Experimental and Molecular Medicine* (EMM). Other Korean academic societies were publishing biochemistry and molecular biology journals at that time (the *Korean Biochemical Journal* and *Molecules and Cells*), and we thought that it was not necessary to publish another biochemistry and molecular biology journal in Korea. After long and intense discussions among our committee members, we reached the conclusion that our society needed a new scope and that it should be molecular medicine. In the 1980s to 1990s, experimental techniques developed by biochemists and molecular biologists, such as gene cloning, DNA sequencing, Southern, northern, and western blotting techniques, the expression of exogenous genes in prokaryotic and eukaryotic cells, and the production of recombinant proteins, began to transform medical science, allowing researchers to study human physiology and diseases at the molecular level. We thought that this new emerging field was promising and decided to pivot away from basic biochemistry and molecular biology and move towards molecular medicine. At that time, I was responsible for publishing KJB as the associate editor, and thus participated in this transition of our official journal. Professor Jeong-Sun Seo of Seoul National University played a leading role as the managing director in establishing the new scope for our society and transforming our journal into EMM.

“Why do you have the policy of not purchasing subscriptions to domestic journals?” “Don’t they just publish papers used to satisfy the degree requirements of graduate students and for the promotion dossiers and research grant applications of professors?” The library director of my college replied to my question with a sneering voice. In our continuing fiery dispute, the director maintained the position that all Korean domestic journals were garbage bins for useless papers that nobody wanted to read, and were only used for the purposes of authors themselves. Although the library director’s point was not totally wrong at that time, his derogatory

**Received:** January 11, 2018  
**Accepted:** January 19, 2018

**Correspondence to** Dae-Myung Jue  
dmjue@catholic.ac.kr

**ORCID**  
Dae-Myung Jue  
<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7422-0562>

remarks about domestic journals were disheartening because they represented common negative views about domestic science journals among Korean researchers, and I was an editor of one of those domestic journals.

In retrospect, that quarrel with the library director was a turning point in my life as an editor of EMM. His humiliating remarks remained with me for a long time, ringing vividly in my ears. It made me want to leave behind the old way of manuscript handling and editing, and to step into an uncertain future.

## Early Experience in Journal Publishing

My experience with journal publishing began in the late 1970s, when I worked as a research assistant in the Department of Biochemistry, College of Medicine, the Catholic University of Korea. At that time, my preceptor Professor Bong-Sop Shim was editor-in-chief of KJB, and he asked me to help him edit the manuscripts we received. Professor Shim played a key role in founding KJB in 1964. At first, KJB published papers written in Korean or English, but Professor Shim persuaded the other members of KSMBMB to convert KJB into an English-only journal in 1975, which was rare for domestic journals at that time. Currently, writing research papers in English is not unusual; in fact, it is mandatory for Korean scientists in order to publish their work in international journals. Moreover, most official journals of major Korean societies only publish papers written in English, because the editors and authors know that only English-language papers will be read globally. In 1975, however, it was not common for Korean scientists to publish their papers in international journals. Instead, most wrote their papers in Korean and published them in domestic journals. Therefore, it is understandable that there were objections from Society members against converting KJB into an English-only journal. Despite this change, KJB lagged far behind international standards.

I was appointed as an associate editor of KJB in 1991. During the 1980s, the previous editors of KJB experienced challenges in publishing KJB. KJB was scheduled to be published biannually, in June and December. However, its publication date would often be delayed for several months, and many errors were present in the published papers. Although scientific research in Korea expanded year by year, with a growing pool of Korean researchers and increasing research funding from the Korean government, the publishing practices of KJB (and other journals of Korean societies) did not improve much, and old practices were still retained. There was no peer review for submitted manuscripts, and all manuscripts received by the editor were published without major revision. Although the manuscripts were written in English, many were poorly

written and hard to understand. Professional English editing services were not available at that time. Although there was a 'guide to authors,' many authors submitted their manuscripts without formatting them according to the requirements of KJB. As the only associate editor, I spent a lot of time editing the format and English writing of the submitted manuscripts. Most authors thanked me for my efforts. However, some authors got angry about how I edited their 'complete' manuscripts and protested strongly.

Even harder than manuscript editing was publishing issues on time. It took nearly a month for the printing company to publish a print issue from the completely-edited manuscripts. Since I needed at least a month to edit all the manuscripts, the official deadline for manuscript submission was 2 months before the publication date. However, just as now, authors tended to postpone the submission of their manuscripts to the last possible minute, and called me to ask me to do them the favor of delaying the deadline until they could send in their manuscripts. The result was that the publication schedule was compressed to the point that I had to spend 2 weeks doing nothing but editing manuscripts from early morning until late night. Even after the manuscripts were sent to the printing company, I had to spend 2 to 3 more days correcting typos with my weary eyes. Although this twice-a-year KJB publication schedule exhausted me each time, I felt gratified when a freshly printed issue of KJB was handed to me and the articles in the issue greeted me sitting in an orderly format. However, this author-centric manner of journal publishing had to be changed for the journal to progress.

## Developing a Local Journal to an International Journal

When the managing committee of KSMBMB decided to change the scope and name of our official journal KJB to EMM, we explained our plan at a conference of society delegates. At that time, the Internet was emerging as a tool for scientists to search for and read research papers. Instead of going to the library and searching the Medicus Index or Biological Abstracts, researchers became able to search PubMed and view the articles they wanted on their office computer. Additionally, the advent of the Science Citation Index and its journal impact factor (JIF) led to the ranking of scientific journals, providing a more practical way for researchers to evaluate journals.

I thought that those enormous changes in global science publishing would make our society delegates understand the urgency of these issues and approve our plan without many objections. However, when I explained that in our new journal EMM, all papers would be peer-reviewed and only papers that obtained favorable recommendations from referees would be

published, there were objections and complaints from the audience, especially the senior members. They argued that the official journal of 'our' society existed for the benefit of 'our' society members, and that the members needed a journal that would publish 'their' papers 'easily.' They claimed that academic societies published their own journals for that reason. They did not seem to know that many major international journals that peer-review manuscripts actually are the official journals of academic societies, although they publish papers authored by anyone, not only members of the society.

Additionally, other delegates objected to our plan to omit 'Korean' from the name of the new journal. They argued that since there are many famous 'American' and 'British' journals, it would be reasonable to add 'Korean' to our journal name. I replied by asking the delegates whether they knew of any major international journals with a name containing 'German,' 'French,' or 'Japanese,' and whether they thought that 'Korean' would be more recognized globally than those country names. I asked them why we should insist on having a regional tag in our journal name, since scientific knowledge is shared among global readers. Currently, journals published by Korean academic societies often do not have 'Korean' in their names. These changes did not come easily.

During the course of this fierce discussion about our new journal, the managing committee members firmly maintained our position that it was time to change our journal according to international norms. The humiliating remarks that I had received from the librarian of my college had given me the strength needed to stand firm against the objections to these changes.

In 1996, EMM began to be published in a new format with fully peer-reviewed articles. It was first listed in Science Citation Index in 1998 with a JIF of 0.162. After being listed, it took 7 years for EMM to cross a JIF of 2.0 in 2005, a rare success for a domestic journal at that time. However, the JIF of EMM showed only incremental growth over the next 7 years, to around 2.5. Some members of our society proposed that we should increase 'self cites' by urging authors to cite papers published in EMM, which I resisted.

## Cooperation with the Nature Publishing Group

The editorial team of EMM had to endure another period of uncertainty when we decided to publish EMM as an academic journal of the Nature Publishing Group (NPG), which publishes *Nature* and many renowned scientific journals. It took almost 2 years from the time when we first met with representatives from NPG to the time when our new website launched, with the first article posted in January 2013. In the interim, we held many meetings of our editorial team with members of the managing committee of our society (which had been renamed as the Korean Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology) and working members of NPG. Many members of our society wondered about the benefits that would be obtained from this partnership and worried about the uncertain future. They said that they could not understand why we wanted to move onto such shaky ground when EMM was already stably ahead of other domestic journals. However, we decided to sail out into uncertain and risky high sea instead of a stable and safe inner sea. Professors Jeong-Sun Seo, Jong-Il Kim, and Kyung-Ho Choi of Seoul National University led the transition process and jointly bore its burden.

## Conclusion

Today, I am sitting at my desk and reading manuscripts submitted to EMM. As has been the case for the last 25 years, editorial work has taken up much of my time at the office. Like most editors of academic society journals, I have had to divide my work into teaching, my own research, and journal editing. Sometimes I have felt my duties as an editor to be burdensome, and have been skeptical about the usefulness of my efforts. After such speculation, however, I return to the manuscript before me, hoping that my work will benefit the progress of scientific knowledge and help researchers and physicians to find new avenues in their work.

## Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.