

A Decade of Leadership – Interview with Adj Prof Poh Kian Keong



The *Singapore Medical Journal (SMJ)* is SMA's monthly academic publication, which aims to advance medical practice and clinical research by publishing high quality articles that add to the clinical knowledge of physicians in Singapore and worldwide. For the past 11 years, Adj Prof Poh Kian Keong, Associate Chairman of the Medical Board at National University Hospital, Senior Consultant and Director of Research at the Department of Cardiology of National University Heart Centre, and Adjunct Professor at NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, has been the *SMJ* editor-in-chief (EIC) and has led the journal to ever-greater heights. Stepping down from his role as *SMJ* EIC, Prof Poh shares in this interview with *SMA News* his journey with the journal and the challenges ahead.

Helming the journal

How did you first come to join and contribute to the *SMJ* team?

I first submitted papers to *SMJ* as an author and later reviewed papers for the journal. A few years later, the then EIC, Prof Wilfred Peh, invited me to join the *SMJ* Editorial Board as an Associate Editor (this role was later renamed to Specialty Editor).

Could you share with us why you decided to take up the role as *SMJ*'s EIC?

It was an honour to be entrusted with the role of leading *SMJ*. Compared to the other EICs since the founding of *SMJ*, I was considered relatively junior. At that time, I really wanted to help Prof Teo Eng Kiong, who was helming the journal. *SMJ* was undergoing structural changes, including the introduction of a manuscript submission fee and ahead-of-print publication. It was an exciting time, and that prompted me to take up the leadership position.

During your term as EIC, you have implemented some changes and strategies that have positively impacted the journal's performance, especially in its impact factor. Could you share more about the work that has been done to achieve this?

Over the years, we have sharpened and refined the journal to make it more attractive to authors and readers. We have had a steady increase in journal impact factor, which is dependent on many factors, including having a pool of authors that will submit good citable papers to us and reliable reviewers working to improve the quality of submitted papers. The *SMJ* editorial office, led by Ms Sarah Lim, has done a great job in improving and optimising the turnaround time of peer review and acceptance to publication.

SMJ used to receive more than 1,000 submissions per year, which took a heavy toll on journal resources. The deputy editors and I started to meet weekly via Zoom to screen new submissions before

they were peer reviewed, promptly rejecting unsuitable papers at an early stage. This reduced the load for both the Editorial Board and our reviewers, and went a long way in allowing them to focus on improving the peer-review process and quality of accepted papers.

Musings and the future

What do you think are some of the challenges *SMJ* or medical journals face in general?

With the advent of generative artificial intelligence and large language models such as ChatGPT, it is increasingly a challenge to make sure that authors have not used these tools to write their papers. There are software programs that can alert us, but we still need to be vigilant.

Medical journals have also seen an influx of sub-journals (sister journals of the main journal, which are often open access) and independent open access journals. These journals typically charge a hefty article processing charge.

Although authors now have more options, those from low- and medium-income countries may not be able to afford these costs. However, some of these journals are unable to survive; personally, I am aware of a few journals that have ceased publication.

There are also a number of “predatory” journals in this “wild” publishing world. Unfortunately, some authors have unknowingly submitted their papers to them and become entrapped. Once their papers are published by these journals (often without the authors’ permission), *SMJ* is unable to consider them for re-publication.

What are some of the traits and attributes you find necessary as the editor of a medical journal?

Journal editors are often busy clinicians or clinician-scientists with endless tasks at hand, so the ability to multitask is an important trait. They should also be willing to work hard, as there is a high volume of papers to be processed weekly. An editor should also be firm and unbiased. *SMJ* has a double-blind peer review process, but the EIC and editors are not blinded. Decisions on papers should be made objectively, based on the scientific content of the paper and its clinical impact and potential to change practices or guidelines, not who the authors are.

Do you have any tips or advice to readers who may be interested in contributing to *SMJ*, whether as a reviewer or board member?

We welcome all who are interested in contributing to *SMJ* – please, approach us! We certainly need experienced

reviewers who are full of enthusiasm. I am proud to announce that we have launched in 2025 our inaugural *SMJ* Editorial Fellowship to mentor younger generations of clinician-researchers in journal editorial board processes. In due course, some participants may even be invited to join the Editorial Board. To be considered for the Editorial Board, the candidate should be accomplished in academia, with stellar track records in publishing, reviewing and leadership. The candidate will also need to have concrete ideas to help bring *SMJ* to greater heights.

If you are interested in contributing to *SMJ* or wish to know more, you can contact us at smj@sma.org.sg.

What has been your greatest takeaway from your position as EIC of *SMJ*?

With good leadership of our national medical journal, we can encourage

better healthcare science, leading to better clinical outcomes for our patients. *SMA*’s motto of “For Doctors, For Patients” complements *SMJ*’s aim to be a journal “for readers, for authors”.

Do you have any words of encouragement for the incoming EIC?

The next EIC, Prof Ang Tiing Leong, is so capable that there is no need for words of encouragement. I have worked with Prof Ang for many years and am confident that he will excel in this role. I just hope he will stay on the job for a longer time than my 11 years! ♦

Legend

1. Prof Poh Kian Keong receiving the *SMA* Merit Award from *SMA* President Dr Ng Chee Kwan during the 2024 *SMA* Annual Dinner
2. Prof Poh Kian Keong with the *SMJ* Editorial Board and Social Media team

