

How to get your medical book published

Peter Richardson

What do medical publishers want? What types of book sell well? How you should you approach a publisher with an idea for a book? This article provides answers to these and other questions. Doctors with good ideas for books are in demand. But beware, success also carries penalties!

WHAT DO PUBLISHERS (AND AUTHORS) WANT?

The answer is books that sell and... well, books that sell! Certainly there may be some academic kudos and maybe even career benefit from writing a book, but most authors want lots of people to buy and read their books. While the sales of medical titles won't come close to JK Rowling and Harry Potter (*Figure 1*), sales like that should be your aspiration!

SO YOU WANT TO WRITE A MEDICAL BOOK

The first question to think about is: who is it for? Is there a clear audience? And if there is, why will people buy it? What is the particular benefit of that book to the reader? If you think about books that you buy, there will generally be a clear benefit, some definite 'added value' that you would not have had without that book. If it's a textbook, you'll get through an exam. If it's a travel guide, you won't get lost in Beijing. And so on.

The next question is: what's the competition? Why will your book be better? For just about any new book there will be existing competition. In fact, from the publisher's point of view, lack of competition could be more worrying. Lack of competition may indicate that there's no market for your book, unless, as occasionally happens, it's a genuine first and defines the field. Sackett et al's *Evidence-Based Medicine: How to Practice and Teach EBM* was one such book, but they're rare.

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And, finally, you need to think whether you're going to write the book yourself, or with a colleague, or maybe edit a book written by a group of contributors. The answer will depend on the type of book you're writing, and on your own temperament. It's just not possible for one or two authors these days to write a comprehensive reference book on, say, cardiology; whereas, at the other end of the scale, a short MCQ book for the MRCP would be well within a single author's grasp.

WHAT TYPES OF BOOK SELL WELL?

While it's always dangerous to generalize, and there are certainly successful books outside these categories, the following come to mind:

- Student and postgraduate textbooks, exam-practice and revision books. Everyone needs to pass exams, and even with the greater emphasis on problem-based learning, learning to learn and less fact-loaded curricula, students still love books that present a subject clearly and concisely.
- Definitive tomes covering a whole specialty. By these I mean books like Braunwald's *Heart Disease*, Mandell's *Principles and Practice of Infectious Diseases*, or Wall and Melzack's *Textbook of Pain*. These will invariably be multi-

author and will sell internationally. One problem is that they may be out-of-date by the time they're published. Nevertheless, many are now including related websites to keep purchasers up-to-date between editions. Possibly an endangered species, but a number still make a lot of money for their publishers and editors.

- Books on hot topics. These can do well if published at the right time when people really need to know about a new subject. Governments in the UK and elsewhere are always obliging publishers and authors by bringing out new health-care initiatives and buzz words, and some of these can lead to successful books. The Royal Society of Medicine's *Clinical Governance: Making It Happen* is a good example here.
- Books on newly emerging subjects. These are hot topics that may become more permanent features on the scene. Recently, good examples have been evidence-based medicine, and health information on the internet.



Figure 1. Sales of medical books won't rival Harry Potter, but any author wants the largest possible audience for their book.

AND WHAT TYPES OF BOOK SELL BADLY?

- Radiology for Surgeons. These types of book are well-meaning and usually written by people in one specialty who think that another should know more about their subject. Maybe they should, but the question is: do they need or want to? Now that's not to say that books on team approaches and shared care can't be popular, just that one specialist writing for another (who has no need to know) will generally not succeed.
- Too specialized. Gone are the days of the specialized monograph (remember when libraries bought books?) whose epitome could well have been *The Sinus Node in Pediatrics*, published in the 1970s. Books that simply have too narrow an interest will not sell.
- 'Me too' professional and reference books. These are the definitive tomes that don't quite make it. Maybe the size is wrong, or the contributors are not right. Whatever the situation, they don't measure up to the existing competition.
- Historical books. Generally these can be hard to sell, but they do have a loyal following. Quite a few doctors are interested in the history of their subject, but sales of such books will never be huge.
- Conference proceedings. There are many excellent things about conferences, but books based on them tend not to sell well, perhaps because the papers presented at meetings are often based on data that the speaker has already published elsewhere. Having said that, doctors are generally glad to receive a book of conference proceedings free of charge, so the best route to publication for such books is often via some form of sponsorship. Occasionally, a book based on a conference presenting new information for the first time can do well.

There are other ways of making a book pay and have a wider readership than would be the case if left to normal market forces. Pharmaceutical sponsorship has been mentioned above. In

addition, various bodies have grants or funds that may be used to support scholarly works, or a particular society may be prepared to purchase a bulk quantity of the book.

HOW TO CHOOSE A PUBLISHER

Should you publish with a large corporation or a smaller company? The answer may depend on the type of book you want to write, and on how important a personal relationship is with your editor. The medical publishing corporations are notorious for changing and reorganizing (rather like the NHS), which is destabilizing for those working in them and for their authors. Smaller companies may be able to give more personal attention, but may have a less impressive list of overseas offices. However, don't automatically assume that a large company is necessarily going to sell more of your book than a smaller one.

Some questions to consider when deciding on a publisher are:

- Do they publish the sort of book I'm interested in writing? How will my book fit into their list?
- Are they responsive? Can I speak to someone and get a sensible reply? Do they answer my e-mails?
- How will they market my book?
- Do I know any other authors on their list and, if so, what do they think of the publisher?

Finally, there's no substitute for meeting people from the publisher and forming your own opinion.

HOW TO APPROACH A PUBLISHER

Use the phone or visit the publisher's web site to find out the name of the commissioning editor for your subject (or, in a smaller publisher, it may be the publishing director or managing director). Telephone or e-mail them to

discuss your project. Expect a prompt and informed response. Remember, it's a seller's market for good ideas.

If possible, have an outline and perhaps some sample material available to follow up any interest from the publisher. Be prepared to take on board suggestions, or even criticism — just occasionally publishers themselves can come up with good ideas!

Persist if rejected. *Longitude* and *The Kon-Tiki Expedition* are both highly successful books that were rejected by over ten publishers before enriching those that finally published them. Even JK Rowling had to shop around for a publisher.

THE TREADMILL

The penalty for success is being asked endlessly to produce new editions, but the satisfaction of having written a book that has sold and been found useful should compensate for this.

You may find yourself being asked to write other books for the same publisher, and may be approached by other publishers (some of whom will wish they'd snapped you up when you talked to them originally).

Publishers will want you to edit journals, write CD-ROMs, help them develop web sites, and so on. Forget about your family and your hobbies for the foreseeable future.

FINALLY

If, despite your best efforts, your book is rejected by one editor after another, just remember what Adlai Stevenson said:

'An editor is someone who separates the wheat from the chaff — and then prints the chaff.'

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Conflict of interest: Peter Richardson runs the Royal Society of Medicine Press who publish medical books.

KEY POINTS

- Be clear about your intended audience.
- Consider what benefits your book will offer them.
- Choose your publisher carefully, and don't assume that large publishers automatically mean large sales.
- Be prepared to cancel your spare time activities if you do write a best-seller.