

SHARING MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH AMONGST LOW AND MIDDLE INCOME COUNTRIES. IS THERE A ROLE FOR A JOURNAL OF MENTAL HEALTH IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES?

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The state of research and scientific publications from Low and middle income countries (LAMIC) has been highlighted as one of the most significant hurdle in meeting the challenge of an enormous burden of mental health problems in these countries. A number of studies have shown that mental health research publications from developing countries constitute only small proportion of the total research output on mental health from the world¹⁻³.

Journals published from developing countries can help to overcome this information gap but these are facing insurmountable hurdles. A recent WHO statement⁴ has described these problems succinctly:

"A major impediment in accessing mental health research from low and middle income countries is the lack of visibility of journals published in these countries. *Most of them are not indexed in international databases and are often not available beyond their country or region of origin.* These journals are published under strained circumstances, in that they often lack sound financial support and have a hard time becoming self-sufficient. They also have difficulty in obtaining suitable articles for publication because their author pool is limited; moreover, influential authors from this pool prefer to publish their best research in indexed journals".

This statement, particularly the sentences in italics (my emphasis) highlights the real problem i.e. these journals are limited to mostly their country or region of origin. As most of these journals are not indexed in major data bases, wider global community lacks access to them. Most importantly however, mental health professionals in the developing countries have limited or no access to their contents. It can be safely said that psychiatrists in Pakistan have much easier access to, say for example, British journal of psychiatry than to the Indian journal of psychiatry and vice versa.

This has serious implications for services and research in developing countries. It is essential for researchers and practitioners to share information about mental health issues and research amongst these countries. Almost all the developing countries are struggling

to provide services in a situation characterized by a large gap between the demand and the resources. The configuration of mental health services in these countries is entirely different from that in the developed nations. This means that I can learn much more from studies carried out in India or Nigeria than those conducted in UK. With the exception of perhaps strictly biological research the studies from developed countries are much less relevant for practitioners in the developing countries. It is therefore crucially important that the research findings from developing countries are disseminated more widely to the readers in low and middle income countries than to the global community in general.

Take an example. We recently conducted a systematic literature search for studies on the relationship between duration of untreated psychosis (DUP) and outcome of psychosis in Low and Middle Income Countries. Two previous systematic reviews published in leading international journals on the subject could identify only two studies from low and middle income countries⁵.⁶ Using a more comprehensive search strategy for identifying such studies, we were able to identify 11 studies, mostly published in non indexed journals. More importantly, we found that studies from low and middle income countries reported a high mortality (up to 6.7 times!) mostly from physical causes in those with a longer DUP, as one of the major outcomes. None of the studies from developed countries reported this outcome. This obviously has significant implications for services and the treatment of the psychosis in these countries.

In this context, perhaps it can be argued that although journals published from developing countries provide a platform for the researchers whose hard work is not published in international journals, but at the same time the research is limited to a particular region or country.

Those familiar with the present scene of international mental health literature from developing countries can easily confirm that international journals do not provide a viable alternative. Patel & Sumathipala² reviewed psychiatric research published in six leading psychiatric journals between 1996 and 1998. They found that countries outside the Western cultural world contributed only about 6% of the published literature and the proportion of publications from low- and middle-income countries was even lower (3.2%). Subsequently Patel and Kim showed that only 3.7% of the published

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research in six high-impact general psychiatric journals emerged from low- and middle-income countries⁷.

The indexing services such as Medline provide little hope for overcoming these barriers to information between developing countries. Western Indexing services cover some 3000 journals, of which 98% are from the developed world⁸. The whole of Latin America accounted for 0.39% of the total number of articles referenced by Medline in 1996, down from a "high" of 2.03% in 1966⁹. Moreover getting the journals indexed is a long tedious process requiring resources which many mental health journals from developing countries are not able to afford.

The solution must lie in strengthening the local journals and increasing collaboration between the scientific bodies sponsoring these journals. The journals published from low and middle income countries provide a vital vehicle for the authors and researchers to have some visibility for their research, if any. These journals are a catalyst for identifying the proper research questions, sharing the ideas amongst research workers and wide dissemination of information. Following steps can help to overcome information barrier between low and middle income countries.

1. Journals from developing countries should make more use of the Internet to facilitate the accessibility. The journals, which can afford the cost of publication, should also be able to meet the expense of a web site. It is not only important to be part of World Wide Web but it is also equally important that the information about the free access is widely disseminated. Directory of Open Access Journals (<http://www.doaj.org>) provides a valuable resource for this.

2. The journals from these countries need to collaborate with each other. There is much need for "twinning" or "pairing" arrangements amongst these journals. These may include exchange of journals and cross publication of contents, abstracts and articles. This is widely practiced in Western scientific literature. For example British Journal of Psychiatry publishes the contents of the American Journal of Psychiatry and vice versa.

3. The scientific societies sponsoring these journals need to take more initiatives in enhancing this collaboration. Scientific meetings and conferences organized jointly by these societies is now a common occurrence but there is rarely any effort to promote the scientific literature amongst low and middle income countries. It should be possible, for example to publish a joint supplement of the journals sponsored by these societies on the occasion of such joint conferences.

However, we need to realize that almost all the journals published from low and middle income countries, like the one in your hand, are the publications of particular national organization, limited in their scope to the national and regional audience. Therefore a case can be made for a journal of mental health devoted to the research from developing countries. The journals

devoted to one disease such as Tuberculosis or a region are commonplace in other fields of Medicine. There are number of journals in Medicine which are devoted to the health problems of low and middle income countries. Practically all the journals on Tropical Medicine can be considered to belong to this category. In fact, our colleagues in Psychology realized much earlier that the psychological issues in developing countries need a separate forum. The journal titled as 'Psychology and Developing Societies' published by Sage Publications is aimed at providing 'better perspective on the role of psychology in the developing world'.

A journal that aims to publish the findings of research carried out in the developing countries will help to overcome these geographical boundaries and help to address a wide information gap that exists at present for research in developing countries. In present era of Internet publication it should not be difficult to bring out such a journal. It will also help to disseminate the research findings, which are relevant to the services and research for developing countries. From the experience of editing a journal I can say there is a big demand and need for such a journal along with a live and kicking JPPS!

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