

## **Editorial**

### **World Mental Health: Role of Journals Edited in Developing Countries**

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Recent epidemiological research has demonstrated that mental disorders cause considerable burden on individuals, communities and health services and it is projected that the burden will increase in the coming years.<sup>1</sup> WHO envisions an active role for research in the multidimensional efforts required to change the current mental health situation at country level.<sup>2</sup> Scientific journals can play a major role in facilitating the flow of information.

However, current publication environment is not facilitative of this. A recent article has shown that the 10/90 divide in internationally accessible mental health literature has remained undiminished through the last decade.<sup>3</sup> Even more worrying is the fact that in biomedical publications, the gap between countries with low and high level of publications is widening.<sup>4</sup> This state of affairs has partly been ascribed to the presence of institutional racism.<sup>5</sup> The term describes any system (usually a combination of institutions and people) that systematically discriminates against others on the grounds of race or creed, and can occur 'when the policies and practices of an organization result in different outcomes for people from different racial groups'. Richard Horton, the editor of the *Lancet* recently claimed that most journals were institutionally racist.<sup>6</sup> The unfair treatment inherent in institutional racism often takes place 'without intention or knowledge', so editors of high impact journals may not in themselves be consciously racist, but their routine practice does promote it. Thus, high impact biomedical journals may be perpetuating the 'nine to one' rule by publishing a tiny fraction of papers originating from low- and middle-income countries, by having very few representatives of these countries on their editorial boards<sup>7</sup> and by turning down, a greater proportion of papers from these countries than they do from others.<sup>8</sup>

The end result of this institutional racism is that the mental health effort in developing countries is based primarily on evidence from developed countries, which have vastly different cultural and socio-economic contexts. Further, the available mental health research literature from developing countries does not address their priority mental health needs.<sup>9</sup> Continued dependence on academics based<sup>9</sup> or trained in developed countries, whose research interests reflect their training environment and collaboration networks;<sup>10</sup> and the mismatch between national priorities and the salience that publishing in high impact journals has on career advancement of researchers, are some of the factor militating against research on priority issues.<sup>11</sup> According to Horton, 'the scientific, medical, and public health priorities of the rich world are presented as the norm.'<sup>6</sup>

Journals from developing countries have traditionally been seen as mere repositories of local mental health wisdom. However, if they are visible through indexing in international databases (Journal of Indian Association of Child and Adolescent Mental Health [JIACAM] has been selected for indexing in the Embase Psychiatry (Excerpta Medica) and Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature [CINAHL]) and the internet (JIACAM is an e-journal), they can play their rightful role in the advancement of science, in its quest to accomplish valid generalizations about nature. As Tyrer<sup>5</sup> has stated, addressing the disproportion in mental health publications “is more than a mere question of equity; if we do not acknowledge the contribution of the 90% adequately we may lose essential elements of knowledge in our attempts to develop a complete picture of the aetiology, course and management of mental disorders.” A steady stream of information about mental health issues in developing countries would also contribute to a greater international and multicultural understanding of mental health and ill-health. Mental health research from developing countries is also needed for advocacy, policy development, establishment and expansion of clinical services at the international level.

The second important role for developing country journals is to help in educating their authors. The key to increasing participation by authors from developing countries in the international literature is to increase their skills in designing and conducting research and in reporting the results. Although workshops for authors and researchers can help, strong national and regional journals are the best resource for developing these critical skills on a continuing basis.<sup>10</sup> In increasing capacity we also need to be aware of the need to foster the development of a reservoir of intellectual talent that has the confidence to set its own agenda in the light of local conditions and not simply follow in the tracks of researchers in developed countries.<sup>10</sup>

The third important role of developing country journals is in translating mental health research into action through dissemination of relevant local and international information to policy makers and public health officials in their countries and regions.

### **Barriers faced by Journals Edited in Developing Countries and Possible Solutions**

Most mental health journals based in developing countries face a multitude of problems including those of resources for publication and dissemination (financial, managerial, marketing), editorial skills and review process, author pool and language, and perhaps biases in indexing systems.<sup>12</sup> The lack of visibility of journals from developing countries affects their dissemination opportunities, and consequently the possibility of application of research results carried by them.<sup>13</sup>

There is much that journals in developing countries can do to help themselves and each other. They can participate more actively in international communication on mental health (e.g. JIACAM is inviting researchers from other countries to serve on review and editorial panels). They can strive to develop author (e.g. JIACAM will provide mentorship to new authors during preparation of articles) and editorial (e.g. JIACAM plans to organize workshops for reviewers and editors) capacity in the region. They could also focus on dissemination (e.g. JIACAM is an e-publication) and utilization of mental health research outputs towards improvement of mental health services and quality of care in the region (e.g. dissemination of information with public health relevance to policy makers and general media). Journals based in developing country can only gain

from these efforts as improvement in the standard of the journal often has the spin-off of attracting more quality articles and financial (and other) resources for the journal.

A well-managed program for supporting mental health research publication is also required to address the needs of researchers and journals from LAMI countries. A joint statement (Box 1) issued by a group of editors of scientific journals publishing mental health research and World Health Organization (Box 2) heralds a major step forward in this regard.. The group also developed a catalogue of ideas (Box 3) to guide follow-up actions by individual journals and editorial and international organizations.<sup>14</sup>

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### **Box 1: The Joint Statement**

#### **Galvanising Mental Health Research in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: Role of Scientific Journals**

The Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, WHO organized a meeting on *Mental Health Research in Developing Countries: Role of Scientific Journals* in Geneva on 20 and 21 November 2003 that was attended by twenty-five editors representing journals publishing mental health research. A number of other editors reviewed and contributed to the background and follow-up material. This statement is issued by all participants jointly.

Research is needed to address the enormous unmet mental health needs of low- and middle-income (LAMI) countries. Scientific journals play an important role in production and dissemination of research. However, at present, only a minute proportion of research published in widely accessible mental health and psychiatric journals is from or about these countries. Yet over 85% of the world's population lives in the 153 countries categorized as low- and middle-income, according to World Bank criteria. Even more worrying is the observation that the gap between these and high-income countries may be widening in terms of their number of publications. The meeting was aimed at finding ways of resolving this unsatisfactory situation.

#### **Responsibility of scientific journals towards international mental health**

Science, in its quest to accomplish valid generalisations about nature, is inherently global. Researchers from all parts of the world should, desirably, contribute to new knowledge about mental health and mental illness, and publish their reports in widely accessible journals. This process is facilitated by a shared understanding of aims and scientific methods, formats of presentation and reference to previous published work. Mental health research from LAMI countries is needed for advocacy, policy development, establishment and expansion of clinical services and to educate investigators in research skills. A steady stream of information about mental health issues in these countries would also contribute to a greater international and multicultural understanding of mental health and ill-health.

Unfortunately, substantial barriers impede publication of mental health research from LAMI countries in widely accessible journals. Researchers from LAMI countries are often unable to meet the requirements of these journals because of limited access to information, lack of advice on research design and statistics, difficulty in writing in a foreign language, and overall material, financial, policy and infrastructural constraints. Limited appreciation of the research needs of, and realities in LAMI countries and the comparative anonymity of their researchers and research centres in editorial offices of journals may constitute additional barriers. Many researchers from LAMI countries are daunted by the seemingly insurmountable chasm between their research effort and its publication in international journals.

#### **Supporting mental health researchers from low- and middle-income countries**

We need to face the challenge of reducing the barriers to publication of mental health research by investigators working in LAMI countries. Time, skills, resources and commitment are needed to publish relevant studies from these countries. Editors' and reviewers' experience with and interest in LAMI countries could be an asset in facilitating publication. Meeting researchers from these countries on 'their home ground' could assist this process. International journals could also help researchers improve their submissions by diligent assessment, detailed recommendations for revision and sympathetic consideration of revised versions, even if it means requesting reviewers to 'take an extra round' to make papers suitable for publication. This is not to say that journals

need to lower their standards in publishing papers from LAMI countries; rather, they should devise strategies to help authors attain those standards. Other approaches to support contributions from LAMI countries could be to launch ‘starter’ sections such as information pages and special columns or even dedicated issues of the journal.

Capacity building is the paramount factor in the long term. Training in research methodology and scientific writing is needed. This could be done through mentoring, personal encouragement, training courses and research collaboration. Increased access to mental health research publications would, by itself, help in capacity building.

### **Supporting mental health journals from low- and middle-income countries**

A major impediment in accessing mental health research from LAMI 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. Some authors who submit their articles to LAMI country based journals may have limited skills in conducting research and/or in writing up their reports. However, it must be stressed that some excellent work does find publication in these journals.

The task of strengthening journals in LAMI countries begins from the recognition of their role as contributors to the enhancement of the mental health knowledge base and as partners in the international research community. Editors of LAMI country based journals require support to elevate standards in editorial procedures, peer review and overall journal management since sufficient expertise and experience may be lacking. This could be achieved through their participation in the publication process of established journals, mentorship, twinning arrangements and training workshops.

### **Enhancing dissemination of mental health research publications**

Many high quality mental health journals have a wide distribution, but most of their subscribers are from high-income countries. Special attention to dissemination of research findings is needed urgently in order to maximize their impact on mental health policy and practice and advance relevant research in LAMI countries. Increasing online availability is cost-effective since little additional expenditure is required to provide access to new users apart from the initial costs of posting material on a website. Free access to many categories of electronic resources is provided by many journals. Initiatives such as the WHO-led Health InterNetwork Access to Research Initiative (HINARI) offer institutions in LAMI countries electronic access to thousands of journals at no or very low cost. The Open Access model provides free online access along with the possibility of unrestricted dissemination of research materials, but charges for publication may be prohibitive for authors from LAMI countries unless support comes from funding agencies and governments, e.g. the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) project in Latin America. Governments in other LAMI countries need to be made aware of the opportunities provided by information technology for dissemination and application of research knowledge.

### **The role of various stakeholders**

Editors of journals, editors’ associations and international organizations, including WHO could help achieve the aforementioned objectives. A catalogue of ideas is presented to act as a starting point for specific action. Although these ideas have been developed for the field of mental health, many of them may apply to other areas of health.

## Box 2: Signatories to the Joint Statement

*Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* (Povl Munk-Jorgensen), *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* (Carlos Sluzki), *Annals of General Hospital Psychiatry* (George St. Kaprinis, Konstantinos N. Fountoulakis), *Anthropology and Medicine* (Sushrut Jadhav), *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* (Sidney Bloch), *BioMed Central Psychiatry* (Pritpal S. Tamber), *British Journal of Psychiatry* (Peter Tyrer), *BMJ* (Kamran Abbasi), *Bulletin of World Health Organization* (Hooman Momen), *Child Abuse and Neglect, The International Journal* (John M. Leventhal), *Chinese Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* (Li Yingxi, Guan Jinli), *Comprehensive Psychiatry* (David L. Dunner), *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* (Mary-Jo Delvecchio Good), *Epidemiologia e Psichiatria Sociale* (Michele Tansella), *L'Evolution Psychiatrique* (Yves Thoret), *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* (Utpal Goswami), *L'Information Psychiatrique* (Thierry Tremine), *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* (Dinesh Bhugra), *International Psychiatry* (Hamid Ghodse), *Journal of Child and Adolescent Mental Health* (Alan Flisher), *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* (Eugene B. Brody, Kathy McKnight), *Lancet* (Laragh Gologly), *Primary Care Psychiatry* (Sean Lynch), *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes* (Robert Ursano), *Psychiatry Research* (Monte Buchsbaum), *Psychological Medicine* (Eugene Paykel), *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice* (Phil Richardson), *Psychopathologie Africaine* (Momar Gueye), *Quarterly Journal of Pakistan Psychiatric Society* (Amin A. Gadit), *Revista Brasileira de Psiquiatria* (Jair Mari), *Salud Mental* (Hector Perez-Rincon), *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* (Paul Bebbington), *South African Journal of Psychiatry* (Robin Emsley, Susan Hawkrigde), *Transcultural Psychiatry* (Laurence J. Kirmayer), *World Psychiatry* (Mario Maj), *Forum for African Medical Editors* (James K. Tumwine), *Global Forum for Health Research* (Andres de Francisco), *World Association of Medical Editors* (Ana Marusic, Peush Sahni), *World Health Organization* (Shekhar Saxena, Pratap Sharan, Benedetto Saraceno, Barbara Aronson, Vladimir Poznyak, Izthak Levav, Edith Certain, R Srinivasa Murthy, Tikki Pang).

Shekhar Saxena, Pratap Sharan, Hooman Momen and Benedetto Saraceno organized the WHO Meeting leading to this joint statement.

## Box 3: Catalogue of ideas

### INDIVIDUAL JOURNALS

#### Giving priority to relevant mental health research from low- and middle-income countries

- Educate editors and reviewers on research needs of and research infrastructure in LAMI countries;
- Use surveys of various stakeholders such as readers (including those from other regions) for shaping journals' priorities;
- Sensitize readers and other stakeholders to international mental health issues (e.g. through special sections and dedicated issues, guest editorship and the commissioning of relevant research from LAMI countries);
- Critically re-examine the use and limitation of measures such as citation rates and impact factors;
- Adopt a multilingual approach, such as translation of relevant articles and abstracts into other languages;
- Include reviewers and correspondents with a special interest and expertise in LAMI countries on editorial boards;
- Accept a higher proportion of submissions from LAMI countries for review; and
- Encourage general medical journals to publish mental health research especially in countries/regions where no mental health journal exists at present.

### **Supporting authors/researchers from low- and middle-income countries**

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- Familiarize researchers from LAMI countries with the peer review process;
- Provide constructive critical feedback/detailed recommendations for revision;
- Make provision for extra rounds of editing, assistance with language and use of technical editors;
- Pay attention to the educational goals of the review process (e.g. availability of reviewer's comments to readers or recruiting young researchers in LAMI countries to referee papers);
- Provide mentorship and support prior to submission;
- Organise training workshops for LAMI country researchers and students on scientific writing and research methodology;
- Facilitate the involvement of researchers in multi-centre projects and research groups;
- Accept and process submissions online; and
- Devise strategies to prevent economic exclusion of researchers from LAMI countries in author/input paying publishing models.

### **Supporting journals from low- and middle-income countries**

- Support “twinning” or “pairing” arrangements, such as invited editorials, exchange of journals, cross-publication of contents/abstracts/summaries/articles and joint publications;
- Agree to serve on editorial boards or as reviewers;
- Agree to mentor reviewers and editors;
- Provide training workshops for editors and reviewers; and
- Support national/regional journals in developing their own websites and/or seeking inclusion in specialized websites on mental health

### **Enhancing Dissemination**

- Participate in electronic dissemination initiatives or provision of free/open access through the journal's website;
- Participate in “buddy system”/peer sponsoring initiatives;
- Employ user-friendly technology for easier downloads;
- Subsidize journal subscriptions for LAMI countries; and
- Explore mechanisms for publication of selected papers in more than one journal for wider dissemination.

### **EDITORS’ ASSOCIATIONS**

- Develop guidelines for good editorial practice concerning publishing and research ethics and conflicts of interest;
- Facilitate access to literature and bibliographic services (e.g. through a directory of databases);
- Support authors to access appropriate specialized journals and specific audience (e.g. through a database of journals and instructions to authors);
- Facilitate mentoring for editors, reviewers and researchers;
- Organise training of editors, reviewers and researchers from LAMI countries; and
- Facilitate the multidirectional flow of articles, resources and expertise (e.g. translation of relevant articles and support with information technology).

**Supporting mental health research, research infrastructure and publications**

- Influence other international institutions to give priority to mental health research in their agendas for LAMI countries;
- Support national institutions in LAMI countries to urge their governments to give higher priority to mental health research;
- Support inclusion of researchers/editors from LAMI countries in relevant decision-making forums; and
- Facilitate capacity building for researchers and journals from LAMI countries.

**Enhancing Dissemination**

- Assess information needs in LAMI countries and raise awareness of these;
- Provide access to journals publishing mental health research (e.g. expansion of HINARI or enabling journals to be open access); and
- Encourage and facilitate the application of information technology.

**Enhancing Collaboration**

- Develop networks between editors, editorial organizations, professional bodies, publishers, funding agencies, national and international organizations and the media; and
- Adopt a systematic approach for follow up: statement of changes hoped for, development of outcome criteria, assessment of progress.

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