

Editorial

Supporting mental health research publications from low- and middle- income countries

The existing level of mental health services and the resources devoted to mental health in low- and middle-income (LAMI) countries is far from what is needed.¹ Any plans to improve this situation requires region- or country-specific information that can only be generated by local research. Scientific journals can play a major role in dissemination of relevant research information, but, this potential is largely unrealized at present. Authors from Latin America and Caribbean region contribute 0.4% of articles to leading psychiatry journals.² Even more worrying is the fact that the gap between countries with low and high level of biomedical publications is widening. Latin America accounted for 0.39% of the total number of articles referenced in Medline in 1996, down from 2.03% in 1966.³

Of course, some of the difficulty in getting research published in leading mental health journals relates to availability of funds and research capacity. In this regard, it is instructive to remember that many Latin American countries have actually seen cuts in health-related budgets owing to economic crises. But other factors like the lack of understanding of research needs of low- and middle-income countries could also be important. Only 1 out of 530 editorial and advisory board members of ten leading psychiatric journals was from a Latin American country⁴ and only about 2% of the journals indexed in international indexes are from LAMI countries. Also, language is a major barrier for authors from non-Anglophonic countries.

Mental health journals from LAMI countries often struggle to effectively inform readers and impact on mental health in the region due to many barriers. These include problems related to visibility and indexing, resources for publication and dissemination, editing, author pool, and language. The end result is that they do not have the credibility, penetration and impact that is needed, as shown by the fact that only 9% and 2.3% of journals in the library of National University (UNAM) of Mexico, were from Mexico and other Latin American countries, respectively.⁵

Judicious dissemination strategies are required to address the needs of most LAMI countries. Some positive steps in this regard for Latin America are the development of regional (e.g. BIREME, LILACS, SciELO etc.) and global (UNITeS, HINARI (WHO), ExtraMed (WHO) etc.) initiatives. But, a lot still needs to be done.

A well-managed program for supporting mental health research publication is required to address the needs of researchers and journals from LAMI countries. The Department of Mental Health

and Substance Abuse, WHO recently organized a meeting on "Mental Health Research in Developing Countries: Role of Scientific Journals" in Geneva on 20 and 21 November 2003 to address these issues. It was attended by a number of journals including the Revista Brasileira de Psiquiatria. The participants agreed to issue a joint statement that included a catalogue of ideas to guide follow-up actions by individual journals and editorial and international organizations.

There is much that journals in LAMI countries can do to help themselves and each other. They can participate more actively in international communication on mental health (e.g. by inviting researchers from other countries to serve on review and editorial panels, developing twinning or pairing arrangements with established journals). They can strive to develop author (e.g. by offering support in preparation of articles, organizing workshops for researchers) and editorial (e.g. organizing workshops for reviewers and editors) capacity in the region. They could also focus on dissemination (e.g. online publication, publication of abstracts/summaries/articles in more than one language) 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). They can only gain from these efforts as improvements in the standards of the journals often have the spin-off of attracting more quality articles and financial (and other) resources for the journal.

References

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