

Teaching of Research as a Necessary Psychiatric Skill .

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Abstract

This paper is written mainly about the postgraduate psychiatric education as it relates to the developing countries. As is well known, developing countries do not have adequate facilities for postgraduate education and students are sent to other countries for training. In most of the countries the period of training varies from 2-4 years in a recognised institution after acquiring a basic medical degree. Successful completion of post basic training usually leads to a degree or diploma in psychiatry. In some countries, e.g. Egypt, it is divided into two parts: a Master degree is awarded after training of two years, while to acquire a Doctor's degree an additional two or three years training is required.

Teaching of research in these training programmes varies considerably. For example for DPM (Diploma in Psychological Medicine) awarded by the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of England, training in research was not obligatory. Probably the same is true for the present membership of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. However, for an academic DPM from the Institute of Psychiatry at the Maudsley Hospital (UK) research training was considered essential. In general, for those training programmes which lead on to a university doctorate degree of Ph.D. (or M.D. in Psychiatry, as in India) there is an obligatory submission of thesis based on a research project as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree. The position for Master degree courses or diploma or certificate training programmes is less clear. In some programmes research training is essential while in others it is not.

Key words -

**Psychiatric education,
Training programmes**

Why teaching of research is necessary for postgraduate education?

Wide variations in teaching of research skills in the postgraduate psychiatric education in different countries and at different centers within the same country is an indication that there is no general

agreement on the need for the teaching of research. Those who are opposed to compulsory teaching of research have usually argued in the following way:

1. Most of the trainees are not going to be research workers or academic teachers in later life; hence why waste time learning research skills. The same time can be utilized for learning other subjects or sharpening clinical skills which are more relevant for the future psychiatric specialists, most of whom are going to be clinicians. By avoiding a research component, like the obligatory writing of thesis, we can reduce the duration of training programmes.
2. Compulsory research training in the postgraduate curriculum helps the teachers more than students. Teachers use students as cheap labour to complete their own pet research projects and publish more papers.
3. Good research can not be completed by students in the limited time available and under the stress of studies and examinations. Hence this effort is wasted. In fact, students end up by learning more about how to fake results rather than how to do good research.
4. Research is a kind of luxury for a developing country. The psychiatrists in these countries need not waste time on learning research. Enough knowledge is already available. A psychiatrist in a developing country should concentrate on the application of existing knowledge.

On the other hand those who believe in the need for the teaching of research have argued that it is an essential component of education. The contribution of research may not appear to be so significant in providing a student with knowledge or skills for his future role as a clinician but it is vital in fostering in him an attitude of scientific curiosity and critical observation which is so essential for a medical specialist. For this very reason it is important that learning of research is not undertaken in isolation as a thesis writing project but should be integrated wherever possible in most of the teaching.

Relevance of teaching of research in postgraduate psychiatric education in developing countries

It is invalid to argue that developing countries need less research. In fact if anything, more scientific research is required to solve the complicated health problems of developing countries. It is easy for medical professionals to take up the role of a passive provider of clinical services. It is like becoming a salesman of a technology whose skills and goods are manufactured abroad. To be truly useful to his community, the medical specialist should be able to modify and adapt the technology to local needs. It is not enough for a doctor to know what is given in a text-book but it is crucial to know how statements get into text books and what is the validity of these statements. Only by developing these critical faculties will he get the confidence to question the teachings of these authors and think of alternative solutions to the problems which he sees in his daily practice.

When considering the role of a psychiatrist in a developing country, one must also keep in mind the following significant changes in the organization of mental health services that are currently taking place in the developing countries.

-The delivery of mental health services is shifting from mental hospitals to general hospitals and still further towards the establishment of services in the community at the primary health care levels. In many places general physicians and paramedical workers are being trained to look after common psychiatric disorders.

-In their new role, the psychiatrists are being asked not only to provide clinical services but also to become a leader of the mental health team. This involves supervision and teaching of the team members, as well as a contribution to the planning and the organization of mental health services in their respective communities and countries.

The arguments in favour of including research training in postgraduate psychiatric education can be summed up as follows:

1. It is true that most of the psychiatrists in developing countries will not pursue a full-time career as research workers though some will be encouraged to do so by teaching of research methodology. The purpose of the research training, however, is not to make them researchers at this stage but to equip them with elementary principles so that they develop a healthy scientific attitude towards the subject. Without training in research, psychiatric education is incomplete such that the trainee is likely to be a poor specialist, more of a technician and less of a scientist.
2. As is well known, a psychiatrist has often to deal with highly subjective clinical material. The current treatment procedures in psychiatry are also often empirical. In such a background it becomes very important that a student learns to objectively balance his subjective observations and "insights". Training in research is an essential component of teaching of scientific objectivity.
3. Due to the shortage of quality manpower, a considerable number of psychiatrists in developing countries are going to take up teaching roles to train more psychiatrists in their countries, as well as to train various other categories of health personnel in mental health. To become good teachers a background in research is useful and, therefore desirable.
4. The problems of the developing countries are very complex and varied. Often the solutions evolved in industrialized countries are not applicable or relevant there. By developing a scientific attitude, health professionals will be more able to modify the existing technology for local needs.

How to teach research as part of post-graduate psychiatric education?

The objectives of teaching research are two fold. Firstly, it can be taught as a necessary skill for those who are going to be involved in research as a part of their future career as a scientist of academic teachers in medical institutions. Secondly, the research training is a means to foster a scientific approach among students for their future professional activities. Of course, both roles are not clearly separate but overlap. Still it is desirable to keep the distinction in mind while planning the teaching programmes.

Writing of a research thesis or dissertation as a part of the training

Preparing a dissertation or thesis is a traditional approach in which a student has to go through the various steps of an actual research. He develops a proposal and writes a protocol, reviews literature, outlines objectives and methods and states his plan of work. Subsequently, under supervision he collects data, makes observations, learns the use of various research instruments, reads more journals and original articles, analyses his own findings using various statistical techniques. He ultimately writes his dissertation which in some places, he has to defend before his peers and publishes his results

in a scientific journal. Unfortunately, many times the exercises does not happen this way. Many students who join postgraduate training courses in psychiatry do not have either the caliber or the background training for conducting sophisticated research. The necessary help required from teachers in terms of time and guidance is often lacking. A student in this position without a previous background in research as is common in developing countries, is suddenly confronted with a bewildering variety of tasks and decisions. He desperately looks for technical and emotional support which is often lacking. The result is a kind of research output which does little credit to the student or the institution. In many places in India and other countries, the students have protested against compulsory writing of thesis as a part of postgraduate degree programme. It would appear that conducting an independent research under supervision is no doubt the best method of learning research but to carry it out successfully, it must have the necessary input of time, inclination of the student and expertise of the supervisor. Some institutions have tried to introduce alternative lesser research requirements like publication of a paper in a recognized journal or simple analysis of a retrospective series of cases instead of writing a thesis based on original research.

What kind of research should be carried out by the students as part of the training?

The purpose of the research conducted by students is not so much to produce outstanding results but to learn the research methods and develop research attitudes for their future careers. The choice of the subject of the research will depend greatly on the inclination of the student as to what he feels is worth doing but he must be guided right in the beginning about the need to link research with the health problems which he sees around him. It is desirable that he takes up a line of enquiry which he can even follow up in his later years. One need not enter into a controversy at this stage about the relative importance of basic research versus applied research. Obviously, both are important but the research should not serve only as a curiosity for the student or serve to fill the pages of a scientific journal but must deal with real life problems and a possible way to solve them. The priority for the developing countries is a decision-oriented or action-oriented research. Hence a student should be made familiar with this approach. For example, while selecting a topic for research a student should be encouraged to visit primary health centres in the community and meet the health personnel and discuss with them what they feel are important mental health problems in the community and the current difficulties in their management. In the teaching departments also, there must be seminars and group discussions on research priorities and the need for the goal-oriented research for developing countries.

Training in research methods

Apart from learning to do specific research, a student must have been taught general research methods which can help him to undertake future research on his own. The topics selected for writing a dissertation should have close relevance for developing countries. It would be helpful to a student from a developing country who is likely to serve as a future teacher or research worker, to learn during his training period how a prevalence survey is conducted or how a clinical drug trial is planned or how

attitude of the community is measured. To support this kind of training he must be taught the use of simple research instruments like standardized mental state examination or measurement of anxiety or depression. He must be familiar with the use of coding of international classification of diseases. In addition, he must have training in basic statistical methods including techniques of storage and retrieval of data. It may be perhaps worthwhile for each teaching centre to draw up a list of topics in research methods which are considered necessary for training of postgraduates in psychiatry.

When a student from a developing country who has taken interest in research, returns to his country he faces many obstacles to carry out good research. One of the major problems is the lack of proper research instruments suitable for his country. For example, even if he wants to do a simple prevalence or attitude survey, he finds the psychosocial questionnaire which he used abroad not suitable for his population. It would be helpful if during the period of his training such problems are discussed. Training centers, undertaking the training of students from developing countries should not confine themselves to the reviews of research done in developed countries but must pay particular attention to the good research conducted in developing countries by periodically reviewing published material in local or foreign journals. Occasionally, the teachers from developing countries can be invited to give lectures and seminars on research conducted in their countries. The World Health Organisation can help by collecting and publishing relevant reviews and annotated bibliographies related to the significant research done in developing countries.

Linking of research with day-to-day teaching

To create a research attitude among the trainees, it is important that research should not appear as an activity in isolation but should be integrated in the day-to-day work. Wherever possible, teaching should be made into problem solving exercises. Students should be made to see how more information in a given situation can be made to bear on the solution of the problem. Students should be encouraged to take up small projects and collect data which is discussed in the peer groups along with a teacher to encourage critical scientific thinking. Many examples can be found from day-to-day work which a student can be encouraged to look from the research point of view. For example, while discussing with students, the follow-up of the patients in a clinic, the teacher can begin from simple questions like why a particular patient has not come back to the clinic when he apparently needed help? What factors decide such behaviour? How much is it related to the diagnosis of the patient or severity of his symptoms or prevailing social attitudes? How do we measure disability? How do we measure social attitudes? and so on and so on ... Depending on the student's interest, the teacher can suggest him further reading and allot him tasks of increasing difficulty.

Summary and Conclusions

Training in research is required not only for imparting basic research skills but it is an important means of fostering scientific attitude among future psychiatric specialists. Medical students in their undergraduate years, often have good exposure in biomedical sciences but have generally very little contact with the psychosocial sciences. Hence, research in psychosocial and epidemiological aspects of

mental health should receive particular attention during postgraduate training. Similarly, special emphasis must be laid on action-oriented research to enable the student to learn to apply to research findings to his daily work. Training in research is best learnt best by actually taking up a research assignment under guidance but there are many difficulties in implementing such training due to the shortage of the trained staff and the time available. Training must be imparted in general research methods. To prepare the student for future work in the developing countries, it is necessary that during training period, there is adequate exposure to research instrument appropriate for use in the developing countries.