

Toward evidence-based planning for research

Following the promotion and expansion of the universities and research centers in Iran during the recent decades, there has been significant progression in the field of research. The studies conducted to assess the rate of Iranian papers published in Medline and ISI databases are indicative of a significant rise since 1990s. The trend of the rise in the number of Iranian papers exceeds the trend observed in many of the developed countries as well as the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean region (1-4).

Such a trend is also evident in case of the researches conducted in the field of behavioral and psychological sciences. The first available scientific journal in this field was first published in 1991. The number of the journals increased to 23 by 2003 (5) and 45 by 2008. The increment observed in these products has been so high that necessitated establishment of a professional national mental health research database (IranPsych) (6). Availability of this database since 2003 has provided the possibility of various Bibliometric and Scientometric studies.

The Scientometric study of the thirty-year output of national research in the field of mental health-related sciences depicted a rising slope in the number of scientific papers with a specifically significant rise in the last five years (1997-2002) (7).

Among research areas, psychology, clinical, neuroscience and epidemiologic research constituted the largest proportions (52.8%, 31.6%, 13.5%, and 10.4%, respectively). The topic of 38.6% of all papers corresponded with the category of mental disorders. Among mental disorders, the largest proportions of published researches were about mood disorders, substance use related disorders and anxiety disorders (8).

Significant dispersal of the research subjects as well as supporting organizations and researchers have been one of the findings of the Scientometric studies. Nevertheless, no action has been taken to establish a national policy with the aim of promotion of national mental health research. Systematizing research, based on a structured national plan and consideration of research priorities requires an evidence-based analysis of these necessities and priorities.

Moreover, community health leans against different factors and existence of multiple resources, which are quite limited. Provision and promotion of health will be achievable in case these limited resources are consumed authentically. In spite of the existing rise in the research output in Iran and similar to many developing countries, so far majority of policy and decision makings have been based on the evidence and the statistics provided by developed countries.

Considering the existing socio-cultural differences, which result in diversity of incidence and prevalence rates of mental disorders as well as their course and treatment, relying on the research conducted in developed countries will not suffice. Research is one of the strategies that can help the countries benefit from their limited resources in order to promote the health status in an appropriate way. However, despite the limitation of research resources in developing countries, research is not based on real and substantial needs of the society. Only 10% of the research budget is dedicated to solve 90% of health problems (9). Indeed, research priorities are not identical in high- and low- income countries. Research must be based on substantial needs of the community, so that unnecessary research and duplication of efforts are prevented (10-13).

Based on the mentioned reasons and in order to promote the national competence for organized planning for research, a series of systematic reviews were started for the first time. Systematic review consists of a study, which assesses the existing evidence on a specific subject. In this variety of study, systematic and explicit methods are used to select and assess the primary researches critically; the data are then extracted and analyzed and the results are summarized.

The aim of conducting tens of systematic reviews, eight of which are published in this issue of the journal is providing an analysis of the mental health status in the country, based on the evidence and documents. The resulting information can influence service planning as well as national research planning. Systematic review studies provide the opportunity to highlight the existing gaps in the scientific fields as well as qualitative weaknesses of the prior researches, and delineate future research priorities.

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