

The Current State of Health Sciences Research in the Country: What are the Needed Steps to Improve the Research Quality

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In recent years, the health research in Pakistan has shown a significant increase when outputs like research publication and funded research projects are considered as indicators. However, this growth does not match the people to productivity ratio. It is a widely accepted view that health research is expensive and its impact in terms of economic and social outcomes are hard to measure, particularly in a country like Pakistan.

A recent report, based on the country-specific citation data analysis of PubMed focusing on Eastern Mediterranean region health research citations published between 2004 and 2013, by principal researchers affiliated to institutions from countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region shows that, Pakistan trails behind Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Morocco when quality publications alone are used as indicators¹. It would not be entirely unrealistic to assume that much of the researches are published in substandard journals that are not captured by databases like PubMed. This dismal picture against the backdrop of increasing number of higher education research units, funded research projects, and relatively less number of publications gives a distinctly different impression. There is no denying to the fact that until recently Pakistan has been facing a critical shortage of clinical researchers, mainly attributed to lack of training opportunities and encouragement from the relevant administrative bodies.

Recent trend of upgradation of medical colleges into Universities and encouragement from the national funding and regulatory bodies like Higher Education Commission (HEC), Pakistan Health Research Council

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(PHRC) and Pakistan Science Foundation (PSF) along with the recognition of research as a promotion criterion by the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC) has generated greater interest among the clinical faculty². It is heartening to know that now we are witnessing the emergence of a new breed specified as “clinician scientists” among the faculty in Universities. Another encouraging sign is the growing interest among the medical college teaching faculty to further their knowledge base by doing PhD, producing trained researchers to conduct clinical trials, epidemiological, behavioral, health services, and outcomes based research, which prepares them to supervise graduate level research students. With these changing scenarios the future of meaningful and applied research looks bright.

With the changing patterns of disease profile, with emerging infections, and non-communicable diseases in South Asia, it would be timely and beneficial to engage the clinical scientists, social scientists and epidemiologists to focus their efforts on improved health care services geared towards prevention and cure of emerging communicable and non-communicable diseases³. Health education practice centers need to develop strategies to discover remedies for local health problems by developing integrated research programmes^{4,5}. Simultaneously, awareness need to be created regarding predatory and sub-standard journals so that the improved quality of publications can impact on indicators of health status⁵.

Adherence to ethical standards of research and publishing is of prime importance for the health researchers to reach out to the global scientific community. Such approaches would bring in recognition and help local medical institutions on clinical decision-making at par with global standards that could be estimated by the level of evidence of their research output.

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