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Child and adolescent psychiatry research during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in various challenges for child and adolescent mental health researchers, and particularly for those at the beginning of their career. We emphasise the challenges and opportunities from the individual perspective of trainee psychiatrists, psychologists, and doctoral or post-doctoral scholars in child and adolescent mental health from diverse settings across the globe.

The pandemic has adversely affected the careers of young professionals in child and adolescent mental health research who are often funded by grants and fellowships (usually doctoral and post-doctoral researchers). This is primarily because of the temporary suspension of all grant applications by different funding agencies. Additionally, international research trainees are constrained by difficulties in receiving their work and study permits because of the closure of government facilities.

All forms of intervention studies have been deferred because of the need for physical distancing. Ongoing cohort and longitudinal studies and randomised control trials requiring contact with research participants appear to be the worst affected. Many scientific labs are closed (with staff working from home), halting research programmes including those focused on neurobiology research in child psychiatry. Similarly, school-based studies cannot be continued until schools are fully re-opened.

Regarding new scientific research, priority has been given to COVID-19.¹ Allocation of funds by different grant agencies to research projects for COVID-19 could further impede the already under-resourced research in child and adolescent mental health for a long period.² Ethics approval for studies has been delayed with a fast track provision available only for studies associated with COVID-19. Recruitment

cannot yet begin for many studies, excluding online studies.²

In the case of trainee child psychiatrists who have research projects as part of their job, redeployment to acute medicine in many cases has meant that research has been effectively put on hold. The need for quarantining in case of active symptoms further restricts research time. The order of priorities (starting with acute medicine) has also meant that provision of child mental health clinical services has been affected.³

However, opportunities have arisen, as well as challenges. Many early career researchers (along with their senior researchers and supervisors) are using their time to formulate and address priority research questions, including understanding the mental health effects of physical distancing, identifying risk and resilience factors, and establishing preventive methods to prevent long-term psychological consequences of COVID-19. Many researchers with technological expertise are involved in invaluable work on development and delivery of online mental health services for this period.⁴

However, for many researchers the pandemic has provided the required time to pause and reflect on any ongoing research, develop skills and competencies in critical appraisal (eg, through virtual journal clubs), and improvising existing research. Many clinicians in the early stages of their career have learned to use virtual or online platforms for research, training, networking, and collaborating. Most of the training sessions in relation to child and adolescent mental health research and research project team meetings are now held virtually, which has been effective in many cases. Some academic mental health conferences have transformed to a virtual mode, providing greater access and affordability to those in the early stages of their career than ever before.⁵

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed a variety of substantial challenges for child mental health researchers at

the beginning of their career, but has also resulted in unique opportunities (including acquiring technological skills and formulating new research questions) that we could build on for the future.

We declare no competing interests.

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