EDITORIAL
Aftermath of celebrity suicide – Media coverage and role of psychiatrists
O. P. Singh 337

REVIEW ARTICLE (INVITED)
Does electroconvulsive therapy cause brain damage: An update
Anat Joseph Jolly, Shubh Mohan Singh 339

ACCELERATED RESEARCH
Psychological impact of COVID-19 lockdown: An online survey from India
Sanneep Grover, Swapnaaeeet Sahoo, Aseem Mehra, Ajit Avasthi, Adarsh Tripathi, Alka Subramanyan, Amit Priyoshi, G. Prasad Rao, Gautam Saha, K. K. Mishra, Kaustav Chakraborty, Naren P. Rao, Mukesh Vaishnav, Om Prakash Singh, P. K. Dalal, Rakesh K. Chadda, Ravi Gupta, Shiv Gautam, Siddharth Sarkar, T. S. Sathyarayana Rao, Vinay Kumar, V. C. Janandran Reddy
State of mental health services in various training centers in India during the lockdown and COVID-19 pandemic
Sanneep Grover, Aseem Mehra, Swapnaaeeet Sahoo, Ajit Avasthi, Adarsh Tripathi, Avinash D’Souza, Gautam Saha, A. Jagadhisha, Mahesh Gowda, Mukesh Vaishnav, Omprakash Singh, P. K. Dalal, Parmod Kumar
Changes in sleep pattern and sleep quality during COVID-19 lockdown
Ravi Gupta, Sanneep Grover, Aniruddha Basu, Vijay Krishnan, Aseem Mehra, Adarsh Tripathi, Alka Subramanyan, Anil Nischal, Alka Subramanyan, Aseem Mehra, Atul Ambekar, Gautam Saha, Kishorod Kumar Mishra, Manish Birla, Mukes, Jagirwala, Narayana Manjusha, Nareesh Nehnabini, Nandini Gaur, Niraj Kumar, Poonam Kumar Dalal, Pankaj Kumar, Praveen Kumar Mitha, Ritu Daga, Sai Krishna Tikka, Samir Kumar Prabhu, Sanneep Grover, Gaurav Kumar Goyal, Shruti Kanchan, Siddharth Sarkar, Sourav Das, Sujit Sarkhel, Susanta Kumar Padhy, Swapnaaeeet Sahoo, T. S Sathyarayana Rao, Vilbab Dubey, Vikas Menon, Vishal Chhabra, Vivekanand Lahan, Ajit Avasthi

ORIGINAL ARTICLES
Confirmatory factor analysis of the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale among Indian adults
Manoj Kumar Sharma, David John Hallford, Nitin Anand
Integrated intervention program for alcoholism improves impulsiveness and disadvantageous reward processing/risk-taking
Rajesh Kumar, Keshav J. Kumar, Vivek Bnejigal, Bangaloro N. Roopesh, Girikamathia S. Ravip
Which factors may differentiate lifetime suicide attempters from ideators in obsessive-compulsive disorder patients?
Cagdas Oyku Memis, Bilge Dogan, Doga Sevinçok, Tolga Tunagur, Sedak Deric Memis, Levent Sevinçok
Network and pathway enrichment analysis of Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder candidate genes
Pratichi Singh
Burnout in medical students of a tertiary care Indian medical: How much protection does resilience confer?
Shaurya Pharasi, Suravi Patra

BRIEF RESEARCH COMMUNICATION
Genetic association of the human GAP43 gene with schizophrenia in a Northeast Chinese Han population
Zhiliu Luan, Wenhua Ming, Xiaoxiao Huo, Jingwei Yu, Bing Wang, Yang Sun

CURRENT THEMES
Sexuality, sexual well being, and intimacy during COVID-19 pandemic: An advocacy perspective
Debanjan Banerjee, T. S. Sathyarayana Rao

COMMENTARY
School-based substance use disorder prevention in India: A brief appraisal
Amrit Patro, Sai Krishna Tikka

VIEWPOINT
Psychiatry postgraduate examinations for 2020 in the middle of COVID-19 crisis: Suggestions from Indian teachers of psychiatry
Kishor M, Henal Shah, Shubh M, V. Mysore, Ajay Kumar, Vikas Menon, H. R. Vinay, Mohan Isaac, O. P Singh

CASE REPORTS
A rare case report of Lilliputian and Broblinghian hallucinations in a case of pemphigus vulgaris
Roshan Sutar, Suman Patra, Faisal Siddiqui, Sanjeev Diwan, Abin Rajan

LETTERS TO EDITOR
More evidence and attention are needed to clarify the correlation between moyamoya disease and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
Jin Yu, Jibh Zhang, Jincbo Chen
Neurobiology of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in moya moya disease
Patra Suravi, Patnaik Ashish
Competition of efficacy of ketamine versus thipentone-assisted modified electroconvulsive therapy in major depression
Anir Jagtiani, Hitesh Khurana, Naveen Malhotra
Comments on "Perspectives, attitude, and practice of lithium prescription among psychiatrists in India"
Kumar Thamaraiselvan Santhosh, Hallikere S. Vishukumar
National guidelines for media reporting of suicide
Smitha Ramadas, Pravennal Kuttichira, Chittaranjan Andrade
Comment on "Attitude, practice, behavior, and mental health impact of COVID-19 on doctors"
Aditya Somani, Ajay Kumar
Authors’ responses to the comments on "Attitude, practice, behavior, and mental health impact of COVID-19 on doctors"
Seshadri Sekhar Chatterjee, Ranjan Bhattacharyya, Sumita Bhattacharyya, Sukanya Gupta, Soumitra Das, Bejoy Bikram Banerjee
Comments on "Psychological impact of COVID-19 pandemic on general population in West Bengal: A cross-sectional study" Sourav Khanna, Nishant Goyal, Christodoy Dajay Khess
Reply to the comments on "Psychological impact of COVID-19 pandemic on general population in West Bengal: A cross-sectional study"
Kaustav Chakraborty, Moumita Chatterjee
Mental Healthcare Act, 2017, and addiction treatment

Sir,

We write with reference to the following article: Rao R, Varshney M, Singh S, Agrawal A, Ambekar A. Mental Healthcare Act, 2017, and addiction treatment: Potential pitfalls and trepidations. Indian J Psychiatry 2019;61:208-12. The authors raise several concerns about the Mental Healthcare Act (MHCA) with reference to addiction psychiatry. We would wish to focus on correcting misconceptions regarding the two most critical points related to the daily practice of clinicians.
The authors describe a vignette of a man with alcohol use disorder (AUD) who is unwilling to get admitted to hospital for the treatment of his AUD and go on to assert that “As the various requirements of Section 89 of the MHCA, 2017, are met, one can argue that the individual can be admitted without his consent.” We are afraid that this limited information does not meet requirements of Section 89 (1) (c) which can only be fulfilled if the person lacks capacity to make mental healthcare and treatment decisions. The mere fact that he does not believe he has a substance use problem is not proof of lack of capacity, and so, a “wrong” decision by the husband (in this case, based on his belief he does not have a substance use problem, and also, does not need admission) by itself is not enough to prove lack of capacity to trigger supported admission. This point has already been tackled in detail by Ameen in his “Comments”[1] on the article under discussion.

The second point the authors make is “Studies show that brief interventions delivered in an outpatient setting are effective for harmful use of alcohol and can be delivered in primary care settings. How justifiable, then, is compulsory (supported) admission in this case?”

This is equally incorrect interpretation of the Act. Section 89 (1) (b) requires that the psychiatrist or the mental health professionals or the medical practitioner, as the case may be, certify, after taking into account an advance directive, if any, that admission to the mental health establishment is the least restrictive care option possible in the circumstances (emphasis added).

If the psychiatrist certifying the admission believes that brief interventions delivered in an outpatient setting are effective, then admission to the mental health establishment is not the least restrictive care option and there is no reason for the psychiatrist to certify a supported admission.

The MHCA has been notified less than 12 months ago. As with any new legislation, there will be need for clarification on various sections of the law, how they should be interpreted in particular circumstances and the challenges in its implementation. Having accepted that, we strongly urge our fellow clinicians to appraise the law in detail. One of the ways forward is to engage with the urgent challenges in implementation through partnership and discussion with the wider mental health fraternity so that we can provide optimum care as enshrined in this progressive Act.

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