**Title: Urgent need to tackle COVID-19 impact on Academic Research in India.**

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**Abstract:**

COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all the sectors including education. To control the spread of the virus, physical education and research activities were halted in all the medical institutions of India. This has posed several challenges to graduate students especially in completing research projects which involve human participants. Many of the students may not be able to complete their research projects within the deadline. This unwarranted pressure on students can drive them to resort to shortcuts through research fraud for the completion of research projects and their course successfully. This issue needs to be discussed, debated and an attempt should be made to avoid/reduce any negative ramifications of this situation.

**Main text**

The government of India imposed a strict nationwide lockdown on 24th March 2020 to arrest the spread of COVID-19 (1). Abiding by the government regulations, several educational institutions including healthcare have postponed or cancelled several academic activities to decrease the spread of the virus (2). Considering the high risk of infection transmission, several academic research projects involving humans have been paused. This has posed several challenges in managing academic research implementations such as teaching and learning activities related to research, participant examination and follow-up, field work for data collection, face to face discussion with colleagues, students and supervisors. Many academic healthcare research activities involve human subjects as research participants, but because of the lockdown, many final year post-graduate students may not be able to complete their research projects in the stipulated time frame.

The pressure among healthcare professional students to complete their research activities in a stipulated time frame may have huge implications on health science in near future. Healthcare students are in a vulnerable situation because of the pressure to submit their research projects for the successful completion of the course. Given this situation, there is a high probability that students may resort to unethical/fraudulent research activities such as data manipulation or fabrication to complete their research projects before the existing deadline. These researches if gets published in the future can damage the credibility and validity of the scientific evidence.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to proactively evaluate this delicate situation, supervise, and recommend the alternate best practices. The major responsibility is now on medical universities and apex bodies such as University Grant Commission, National Medical Council, Dental Council of India, AYUSH ministry and Indian Council of Medical Research which directly or indirectly regulates the academic research activities in healthcare institutions of India.

Anticipating the high probability of research fraud in academic research projects of healthcare students, we would like to suggest a few recommendations to tackle the situation. Firstly, Universities and research regulating bodies should extend the date for research project submission. Already universities have issued a notice of extension of deadline for the dissertation submission (3,4). Secondly, they should allow the submission of incomplete research projects (especially projects requiring human participants) for final year students who are on the verge of completion of their course. This may lead to poor quality research submission, but this will increase transparency and reduce scientific misconduct in research projects. Though these research may not add any quality evidence to science, we should be happy that this will not harm science by publishing fraudulent research in the future. Lastly, universities should allow newly admitted healthcare professional students to switch their research projects if they have already submitted the protocol and feel that it may not possible to implement those projects in near future considering the uncertainty of the current pandemic situation.

These suggestions may not be sufficient but definitely necessary to reduce the possible future scientific misconduct in academic research in India. We suggest that this serious issue should be debated and evaluated thoroughly by involving all stakeholder such as educationalists, vice-chancellors, scientists, experts in research ethics, relevant government authorities, policymakers, teaching faculties and finally the healthcare students to formulate the strategies which are beneficial and also implementable.

These amendments will not only reduce the unwarranted pressure among students but also help them in developing the sense of research integrity they need to practice in the future. We believe that, in this era, where we are observing prevalent scientific misconduct such as predatory publishing, retractions because of data manipulation and other fraudulent practices which are more damaging to scientific evidence, we need competent researchers who are more aware of ethics and also practices research integrity.

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