Title: What is wrong with MCI?

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Abstract:

The MCI’s policy on faculty promotions will further derogate the already pitiful situation of research in most medical colleges of India. Rather than discussing the pitfalls within the policy document, it is essential that the policy must be criticized for its lack of clarity and preposterity. It is not clear whether MCI wants to promote research in the country or use research as a tool for enhancing medical education and this is not a very scientific way to achieve either of the two. The definite possibility of research misconduct in the absence of government legislations makes the policy document itself unethical.

Key words- MCI, faculty promotion , research, funding

Main article:

Looking at Medical Council of India’s (MCI) take on promotion of faculty recently1, it is quite palpable that the faculty of medical institutions across the country are in a state of alarm. This is a quirky situation when the whole onus of research is put on the faculty without any consideration of the fact that most medical colleges in India do not have a system of intramural funding, apt infrastructure and a pertinent environment for carrying out good research. It appears to be capricious on the part of MCI to make publications, as an outcome of research, mandatory for the faculty with little contemplation on the fact that how they are going to do it without implementing objective standards for carrying out research, both for individuals and institutions.

Although continuous assessment of academic achievement of faculty is one of the essentials in maintaining good standards of professional and ethical medical education, using publications as a parameter for the same may have serious ethical consequences for our country. One of the primary objectives of MCI is ‘maintenance of uniform (not high) standards of medical education, both undergraduate and postgraduate’ and publications are a logically disparate way to achieve the same, at least in non-standard research environments2. India has designated research institutes for funding and conducting health research. Most medical colleges in the country do not have research infrastructure or intramural funding for health research and most research is funded by external agencies. The need for research on a topic is evaluated by the funding agencies. The selection of a research project is governed by the need of the funding agency rather than the interest of the faculty. This violates the concept of equal opportunity to faculty in terms of funding. The emphasis on research by faculty without making any provisions for empowering them with infrastructure and resources will just lead to poor quality and redundant research.

MCI is not a recognised research regulatory body but it is somehow trying to wriggle into the research mainstream of the country bypassing the planning commission. If the publications are forced on the faculty, in the absence of any funding or research infrastructure, there will be little, if any, concerns about research ethics or integrity. Promotion means a hike in salary, reputation, self esteem, etc. and people may very well ignore research ethics in favour of survival. The government bodies actively engaged in research are working hard to make research more ethical and useful but MCI is trying to turn research into a commodity3.

In India, there is no government legislation in India for research misconduct. The policy on promotions by MCI is unethical in the sense that rather than promoting research in medical colleges it may actually promote unethical research practices as the state governments/ private organizations do not have any legal or moral binding to provide research infrastructure4 or funding to medical college faculty and the external agencies do not provide funding for every research conceived by a faculty. Research infrastructure & funding are not essential criteria for establishment of medical colleges in India. Before imposing superfluous and not well-thought rules on the faculty, the MCI must first aim to lay down specific research related minimum guidelines (if at all they are empowered to do so) for institutions as well so that some responsibility is shared and meaningful research is carried out. We feel that rather than a healthy initiative for research, the current policy is more of a tyrannical decision that reflects on the hypocrisy and ineptitude of MCI as a national medical regulatory body.

The most difficult part to understand here is that- how this stringent policy will help MCI achieve its objectives? The policy undoubtedly has no implications for maintenance of uniform standards of medical education. In fact, the rich states may be able to provide more opportunities for research to medical colleges than the poor states and as a result creating an undesirable non-uniform education environment. This is very obvious, e.g., as state run medical colleges in Delhi are far better in terms of infrastructure and quality of research than the state run medical colleges of Assam but the quality of medical education is more or less the same.

Most faculty joining medical colleges have little training in research, except for the part during post-graduation. Although officially there is a thesis involved in post-graduation training but the poor quality of research training is well known to almost all medical specialists (no references for this one). The lack of clear objectivity in the policy document indicates that it is just a desperate attempt to appear professional in the global research scenario and in the process transferring all the responsibility on to certain individuals so as to create a window of opportunity for shifting the blame whenever the need arises. The institutions and the state government are totally absolved of their responsibility towards research. The MCI has refrained from issuing any standard guidelines for them to create optimum research facilities and research funding for the faculty. Looking at the flaws and casualness of the document and the flippant attitude of MCI to come up with a logical and reasonable solution, it seems that MCI has not succeeded in doing an ‘original research’ on addressing the problem of research in the country. Medical faculty also happen to be doctors with an enormous workload in resource poor country like ours and promoting research in such dictatorial manners will only gradually lead to the demise of medical practice in medical colleges (which are also tertiary care institutions).

I feel that publications for promotions are a very bad idea in absence of government legislations on research misconduct. Unethical research will pollute the whole research environment of the world. In present times, quality research is not practically possible without funding, legislation, training and infrastructure. The ingeniously percolated idea of perceiving research as a tool for an individual’s academic career advancement, rather than a nationalist concept of doing research for the country, could be another reason for regulatory bodies to conveniently come up with such skewed policies. Doctors are very intelligent and hard-working class of people. It is not in the interest of the nation or society to corner doctors by putting a gun to their heads. The MCI must take initiatives to imbibe, in individuals and institutions, the concepts of research integrity and propagate research as a tool for the nation’s development rather than relentlessly trying to create a hostile, unfriendly and autocratic environment in an effort to unnecessarily compete with the west.

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