

A new era for African psychiatry

On the 10th March 2009 a letter was sent to myself as Editor-in-Chief of this *Journal* from Sheldon Kotzin; a letter from the National Library of Medicine in Bethesda, Maryland, United States of America. The letter informed me that the African Journal of Psychiatry had been selected for inclusion in the MEDLINE database. A milestone in the life of any biomedical journal.

This Journal was not always the *African Journal of Psychiatry*. It started out as the *Journal of Anxiety and Depression*, whose founding editor was Michael Berk (he has been, and remains, a member of the editorial board). Having taken over editorship of the *Journal of Depression and Anxiety* in 2001, I realized that the publication needed a clearer identity in terms of location and discipline. In 2002 it became *South African Psychiatry Review*. It should be borne in mind that as *South African Psychiatry Review*, an application for inclusion in MEDLINE was made, but was unsuccessful. However, the process was as much instructive as it was disappointing. Over the years as *South African Psychiatry Review* a foundation was laid, whereby both content and style were continuously reviewed and revised. Opinion was constantly sought, and feedback gratefully received- always aiming to improve both the quality of content as well as ensure that the elements necessary for MEDLINE inclusion were incorporated. In this regard there was extensive marketing of the *Journal*, networking amongst colleagues and ...politics. The process requires all of these elements, and sometimes a touch of sheer bloody mindedness too. In August 2007 the *African Journal of Psychiatry* was launched - the renamed *South African Psychiatry Review*. The *Journal* also became the official publication of the African Association of Psychiatrists and Allied Professionals (AAPAP) together with becoming affiliated to *International Psychiatry* - a publication emanating from the International Desk of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in the United Kingdom. Within 6 editions of its launch, the *African Journal of Psychiatry* made a successful application to MEDLINE. Something spoken about, worked towards and hoped for had happened. That elusive dream had become a reality. The inclusion after 6 editions should not mislead any who are unfamiliar with the history of the publication into thinking that our selection was not based on years of endeavour. This is something that those who assess journals for selection into the MEDLINE database were quite aware of. To say that it has been a smooth journey would be a lie. To say it has been hard work, requiring persistence and belief against the odds would be closer to the truth. It has also been a pleasure. Along the way I was fortunate enough to meet with other editors, whose journals were in MEDLINE. They certainly shared their experience and inspired me. A special thanks to Povl Munk Jorgensen (*Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*) and Lars von Knorring (*Nordic Journal of Psychiatry*). I also had contact with Garry Walters (*Australasian Psychiatry*) and ultimately Peter Tyrer (*British Journal of Psychiatry*) and Hamid Ghodse (*International Psychiatry*). A very special thanks to Peter Tyrer. It helps to have support, and people who believe in you. There

are many on the editorial board who have walked this path with me, when the *Journal* was not in MEDLINE. Their support was critical, and at last there is something to show for their involvement. It is also necessary to acknowledge the facilitating and supportive role played by Inhouse Publications and Andrew Thomas.

The moment is to be savoured because as this editorial is published so the moment will have long passed and business as usual will have resumed. The job now is to further build the credibility and profile of the *Journal* both within the continent and internationally. I think we are very well placed to do so and the progression of the existing electronic presence of the publication (from being hosted to becoming a stand alone site, with open access) provides an excellent platform- not only for the *Journal* but also a range of organizations whose involvement with psychiatry through the *Journal* contributes to the advancement of the discipline in Africa.

What does MEDLINE - in the current context- mean for African, and world, psychiatry? Until now there has been no African psychiatric journal in nearly 30 years that has been independently included in the MEDLINE database. According to the Journals database of MEDLINE, the *Egyptian Journal of Psychiatry* was briefly included during the period 1978/1979, with *The African Journal of Psychiatry-Le Journal Africain de Psychiatrie* - emanating from Nigeria and published in English and French - being included between 1975 and 1981. I mention 'independently' as the *South African Journal of Psychiatry* content was included- albeit inconsistently- for a period through being a supplement of the MEDLINE included *South African Medical Journal (SAMJ)*. MEDLINE terminated this arrangement some years ago i.e. the indexing of this SAMJ supplement. Things have changed. We now have a viable publication that has gone from strength to strength, growing along the way through a range of titles but building towards this milestone. The issue though is not so much what went before, but what will follow. This is the next challenge. But to return to the question, I believe the implications are profound. The diaspora of African psychiatrists (and locally trained medical practitioners generally) is well known, and as a consequence the continent has struggled to meet the requirements of both service provision and academic advancement. This has not been helped by war, famine and despotic regimes. Whilst there is certainly service and academic delivery - with pockets of excellence in either area- on the whole the continent struggles. Further, it has been very difficult to unite African psychiatry. The reality of infrastructure deficiencies which render consistent, reliable communication a problem as well as the cultural heterogeneity of the continent certainly do not contribute towards cohesion. This is not necessarily a uniquely African problem. The *African Journal of Psychiatry*, aside from providing a tangible product as the official journal of the AAPAP also provides a hub for research output and networking amongst African, as well as non-African- academics and related organizations. This will develop more fully with the launch of the dedicated website.

There has been much said and written about the inherent bias against developing world content in publications emanating from the developed world. Specifically in relation to the so called Low and Middle Income Countries (LAMIC). Whilst this may on the one hand appear accusatory, at some level it is simply stating the obvious i.e. that self interest is a reality. In this regard it is up to the fraternity of psychiatrists in the LAMIC group to determine strategies that will enable them to have publications that best serve their interests whilst also contributing to the pool of knowledge globally. There are such publications, and this *Journal* now joins their ranks. The World Psychiatric Association (WPA), through the Publications Section (whose current Secretary is Helen Herrman) has an agenda to facilitate this development and it is to be congratulated for such an agenda which will hopefully be widely supported and acknowledged. The further creation and dissemination of knowledge through supporting publications in the developing world can only benefit all. In this regard we begin to move hopefully beyond self interest - whilst not ignoring local needs or retaining individual identity. I would like to believe that with the inclusion of this journal in the MEDLINE database, it inspires others to believe that it is possible to achieve in this way. It must be noted that the

collaborative involvement of those with existing knowledge of such processes is very important, hence the relevance of the WPA initiative which has yielded a number of publications related to aspects of the work to date.¹

The issue of quality cannot be ignored, but with a developmental agenda and a sensitivity to local conditions I believe that publications such as the *African Journal of Psychiatry*, and others, can provide the impetus for improved quality, credible data and better mental health for a broader range of society. This is the ultimate challenge for all editors. I look forward to meeting it, and invite you as the readership to join me in this next leg of the journey.


Christopher P. Szabo
Editor-in-Chief

Reference


1. Mari J, Patel V, Kieling C, Anders M, Jakovljevi M, Lam LCW et al. The 5/95 Gap on the dissemination of mental health research: The World Psychiatric Association (WPA) task force report on project with editors of low and middle income (LAMI) countries. *African Journal of Psychiatry* 2009; 12(1): 33-39.

Christopher Paul Szabo

EATING DISORDERS



The Access Series



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About the Author

Christopher P. Szabo is Professor & Chair and Head of Clinical Psychiatry in the Division of Psychiatry, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. He has extensive experience in the diagnosis and management of eating disorders, having been the consultant in charge of the eating disorders unit at Tara Hospital for many years. He has published widely on the subject as well as being extensively involved in public education through media and lectures.

About the Artist

Deborah Glasco is an Associate Professor in the Department of Molecular Medicine and Haematology, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. She believes that her creative energy is synergized by the dichotomy of her work both as a doctor/researcher and artist. She has received informal training in drawing and painting at the Johannesburg Art Foundation and more recently, has studied etching and print-making under the tutelage of master print-maker, Collin Cole (Blue Door Studio, Johannesburg).

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