



Implementing Psychopharmacological Training and Prescriptive Authority for Psychologists in India: A Strategic Plan

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Abstract

Proficiency of psychopharmacological expertise is an important aspect of psychological practice for all psychologists. This commentary proposes that psychopharmacology to be integrated systematically into the curricula of training programs for psychologists and posits that a sound policy for prescriptive authority should be developed to enhance effective, well-rounded, psychological services, which can be offered by qualified Psychologists in India. Without that crucial body of knowledge and broader scope of practice, psychologists are constrained in their ability to truly collaborate with other disciplines and provide well-rounded mental health care. Here, this commentary provides a systematic framework for the adoption and implementation of these considered innovations in India.

Keywords: Indian Prescribing Psychologists; Psychopharmacological Training; Prescribing Privileges for Psychologists (RxP); RxP India

Abbreviations

EPPP: Examination for Professional Practice in Psychology;
MSCP: Master's degree in Clinical Psychopharmacology;
PEP: Psychopharmacology Examination for Psychologists;
ABPP: American Board of Professional Psychology; RCI:
Rehabilitation Council of India.

Introduction

The Prescriptive Authority for Psychologists (RxP) movement has gained considerable momentum in the U.S., enabling psychologists, after undertaking additional stringent training, to prescribe psychotropic medications. This has led to discussion of this topic throughout the world, including New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, the United Kingdom and Canada. Given this paradigm shift in the arena of psychology and mental healthcare, it is an appropriate time for India to start a serious conversation regarding

this. Setting up special teams to look into how to power psychologists with prescriptive authority, along with training them in pharmacotherapy, seems like a wise move. This piece delves into the strategic plan on allowing psychologists in India to prescribe medications and receive training in psychopharmacology, drawing on existing research and the journeys of countries that have already ventured down this road.

The Need for Psychopharmacological Training for Indian Psychologists

Psychopharmacology is also a crucial aspect of mental healthcare, impacting the course of treatment and patient well-being. Without adequate knowledge of psychopharmacology, psychologists may face limitations in their ability to provide comprehensive care to their clients. Given that psychologists are leaders in mental health with a range of non-pharmacological tools, providing them with

psychopharmacology training and prescribing privileges could help reduce over prescription by psychiatrists. Equipped with prescribing authority, psychologists could also practice drug tapering and deprescribing, ensuring more balanced and individualized patient care [1].

As emphasized by Julien RM [2], deficiencies in psychopharmacological training hinder psychologists' capacity to evaluate medication effects, monitor side effects, and collaborate effectively with medical prescribers. In India, where mental health disorders are prevalent, enhancing psychologists' proficiency in psychopharmacology is imperative to address the growing demand for holistic mental healthcare services.

India faces a dual burden of communicable and non-communicable diseases, with mental health disorders contributing significantly to the latter. According to the National Mental Health Survey of India, 2015-16 [3], approximately 13.7% of the Indian population suffers from mental health issues, including depression, anxiety disorders, and substance use disorders. Despite the prevalence of these conditions, mental healthcare remains under-resourced and fragmented, with limited access to qualified professionals and evidence-based treatments.

Psychologists are uniquely positioned to address the mental health needs of diverse populations, leveraging their expertise in psychological assessment, counseling, and therapy. Yet, psychologists usually can't prescribe mental health drugs, even though studies show that mixing talk therapy with medication can work really well. If we let psychologists in India also prescribe, it could make getting mental health care easier, cheaper, and more effective. This would likely lead to better results for both people and the broader community.

Benefits of Prescriptive Authority for Psychologists in India

Improved Mental Health Services

In India, getting psychiatric help can be tough, especially in rural areas. Psychologists, often already working in these locales, could step up as the main mental health caregivers, tackling both the mind and body aspects of mental health. If we let psychologists prescribe medications, they could provide fuller care to more people, especially where psychiatrists are scarce. This could really boost mental health support and make healthcare more inclusive for everyone, no matter where they live.

Better Treatment Strategies

Psychologists are great at creating personalized treatment strategies that fit each person's unique situation. If they could also prescribe psychotropic medication, they'd be

able to weave drug therapy into these plans, tackling both mental and biological issues. This all-in-one approach could make treatments more effective, helping those with complicated mental health issues recover more holistically. Plus, having psychologists handle both psychotherapy and psychopharmacotherapy would make getting help simpler for clients, as they'd have a one-stop shop for mental health care.

Strengthening Professional Roles

When psychologists can prescribe, they take on a special and central part in healthcare, blending their expertise in therapy with the ability to use medication. Broadening what they can do boosts their standing in the medical community and makes them key players in teams that work across different health fields. This bigger role not only lifts the profile of psychologists but also shows the world they're highly capable and vital in mental health care.

Suggestions on How to Implement RxP in India

In the United States, psychologists aiming to gain prescriptive authority must navigate a comprehensive pathway. This begins with obtaining a doctoral degree (PhD or PsyD) and successfully passing the Examination for Professional Practice in Psychology (EPPP). Following this, they must complete a post-doctoral Master's degree in Clinical Psychopharmacology (MSCP) and gain supervised clinical experience in psychopharmacology. They are also required to pass the Psychopharmacology Examination for Psychologists (PEP) and secure certification from the American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP). This rigorous process is further influenced by state-specific regulations, which can add additional layers of requirements based on the location of practice [4].

For implementing a similar process in India, here's a proposed plan:

Curriculum Development

This proposed post-doctoral Master's program in Clinical Psychopharmacology (MSCP) aims to equip psychologists with the specialized knowledge and skills required for prescriptive authority, aligning with international standards and best practices. The curriculum is structured to ensure comprehensive training in psychopharmacology, focusing on ethics, real-world practice, and working well with others. It's all about preparing psychologists to handle prescriptions with the utmost care and effectiveness.

Certification and Licensing

Set up a new oversight body or work with the existing Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) to craft tests similar

to the Psychopharmacology Exam for Psychologists (PEP). This would help establish a national level standard method for training psychologists to prescribe psychotropic drugs effectively.

Psychopharmacological Training Supervision

Implement practicum programs within hospital and clinic settings to offer psychologists with psychopharmacological experience under supervision. Such hands on training should be overseen by a physician or prescribing psychologist specializing in the safe administration of psychotropic medications.

Policy and Regulatory Framework

Collaborating with government health agencies, mental health organizations, and other stakeholders to develop appropriate legal and regulatory guidelines for the prescribing psychologist role. Such measures will ensure that practices of prescribing should be safe, ethical and in consonance with professional guidelines thereby bringing about transparency and accountability in the healthcare system.

Challenges and Considerations

One major challenge that could come is going to be from psychiatric organizations who may believe that the extension of prescribing authority to psychologists could be viewed as a diminishment of the power psychiatrists hold over psychotropic medications. This similar issue also was observed in the United States, where RxP- Prescriptive Authority for Psychologists came to rise. However, despite initial resistance, more states in the USA have adopted RxP, and psychologists have been prescribing medications for over three decades, contributing to a reduction in suicides and other mental health issues. This demonstrates the positive impact of prescribing psychologists in improving mental health care [5].

It is also important to raise public awareness and acceptance of prescribing psychologists. Efforts should aim at educating the public, policymakers, and healthcare professionals about the qualifications and capabilities of these psychologists. By promoting the benefits of integrated mental healthcare, campaigns can help correct misunderstandings, build trust, and strengthen the confidence in prescribing psychologists' role in improving mental health care.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the RxP movement in the U.S. provides valuable lessons for India in expanding the role of psychologists through enhanced psychopharmacological training and prescribing authority. By granting psychologists prescribing privileges, they can contribute more significantly to addressing the complex mental health needs of the Indian population, improving access to care and offering more comprehensive treatment options.

Therefore, I strongly encourage professional psychological associations, government bodies dealing with mental health, and university educators in India to incorporate psychopharmacology more comprehensively into their curricula and training programs to ensure proper prescribing licensure for psychologists. Additionally, I call upon the American Psychological Association to lead us to pertinent medical literature and to motivate and guide us in attaining proficiency in psychopharmacology, thereby fostering collaborative and esteemed roles within the healthcare team.

It has become evident to me that the optimal treatment of mental health disorders necessitates a blend of psychopharmacological and psychological interventions. The absence of a fundamental and up-to-date understanding of psychopharmacology deprives psychologists in India of the opportunity to fully engage as integrated members of the healthcare team. More significantly, such a deficit in knowledge deprives our patients of the best possible care.

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