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Edited by Kiriakos Xenitidis and Colin Campbell

Cognitive–behavioural toxicity? Reflections from Westminster

At our local journal club at the Gordon Hospital, Westminster, we recently read the excellent paper by Crawford et al on patient experience of negative effects of psychological treatments.1 All present were first struck by the novelty of the concept of considering the side-effect profiles of psychological therapies – and then, a split second later, astonished by our own astonishment. As psychiatrists thinking about aetiology and treatment, we are fed and watered on the biopsychosocial model. We are also accustomed to sharing the potential benefits and problems associated with treatments we offer, but seemingly only in matters of medication. We are grateful to Crawford et al for bringing this ‘blind spot’ to our attention and hope their paper will help raise awareness of the simple yet fundamental observation that psychosocial interventions may also have downsides.

As the authors have acknowledged in their ‘Limitations’ section, their study is not without problems. First, we – like the authors – noted the low (19%) inclusion rate of participants relative to the original sample identified. There may well be significant differences between the characteristics of the 19% who did take part and the 81% who did not, creating considerable potential for bias. Second, with a view to excluding potential confounding, we would have liked to know a good deal more about the clinical details of the participants – their diagnoses and, in particular, what other treatments may they have been receiving.

In addition to these methodological observations, we were left with a sense that the practical applicability of the study’s findings is significantly limited by the lack of what the authors term ‘qualitative data about negative effects’. When trying to imagine ourselves drawing on the paper as part of evidence-based practice, we strongly suspected that patients would not find it helpful to be told that there is a 5.23% chance they will have ‘lasting bad effects from the treatment’. We would be keen to know more about what the authors’ ‘ongoing analysis of in-depth interviews’ has revealed in this regard.

Finally – more at the level of intrigue than critique – we were interested by two findings which appear to point in rather different directions. The first is the strikingly low rate (5.23%) of reported side-effects of therapy, with roughly 87% of respondents reporting no negative effects. Taking into account the earlier point about giving as much consideration to potential side-effects of psychological (and social) interventions as biological ones, and considering that the efficacy of psychological therapy is, at least for some conditions, broadly similar to that of medication, the side-effect rates identified seem almost too good to be true. We wonder if this may reflect a corollary in patients of our own hitherto lack of awareness of the potential downsides of psychological treatment. On the other hand, our eyes were caught by Table 3 of the paper, which seems to indicate that receiving a large number of sessions of psychological treatment is associated with an increased rate of side-effects. Of course, it may be that the higher number of sessions is due to increased severity and complexity of cases, in which we would expect negative experiences (perhaps interpreted as side-effects) to be more frequent. However, we cannot rule out the possibility of the phenomenon of ‘cognitive–behavioural toxicity’, which should clearly be a focus for further consideration and research.


NNT and NNH remain helpful in evidence-based medicine

We read with interest the commentary by Roose et al regarding number needed to treat (NNT) and the concern that this metric is difficult to interpret given the high placebo response rates observed in contemporary clinical trials.1 The principal objection of Roose and colleagues is that ‘NNTs derived from clinical trials are not directly relevant to clinical decision-making, because they are based on control conditions that do not exist in standard practice’. Although we agree that this may limit the utility of NNTs from some studies, we contend that NNTs commonly remain ‘indirectly’ relevant, as explained below.

Indirect comparisons of effect sizes among different medication choices can be quite helpful in ranking interventions for both

Authors’ reply: We share Yates and Mengistu’s surprise at how little attention has been given to negative effects of psychological treatments. Throughout medicine, patients are given information about potential for negative effects of treatments, so that they can make informed choices about them. The principle that people should be given information about risks as well as benefits holds true in other areas of life, such as choices that people make about investing their money. So it really is surprising that people can be referred to and take up offers of psychological treatment without being told about the potential risks of treatment.

In the past, paternalism meant that people could be given treatments in the belief that these were ‘in the patient’s best interests’. However, this approach is no longer acceptable when discussing pharmacological treatments, and we believe it is no more acceptable when discussing talking treatments.

As Yates and Mengistu point out, the low response rate to this national survey means that the data do not provide a reliable estimate of how often people experience harm from psychological treatments. Ongoing research by the study team and others will hopefully ensure that a clearer picture of the features, prevalence and risk factors for the negative effects of psychotherapy will emerge, allowing strategies to be developed that reduce these effects. Only then will patients be able to provide fully informed consent for the psychological treatments that may help their condition.

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efficacy and common tolerability challenges, provided that the studies used for these calculations are similar enough. Number needed to harm (NNH) values may be even more helpful when distinguishing among treatments that are relatively otherwise similar. The NNH can be for overall tolerability (discontinuation because of an adverse effect) or the occurrence of specific adverse effects of concern for individual patients being treated (such as sedation, weight gain or akathisia). Moreover, ratios of NNH to NNT can provide overall estimates of the risk–benefit trade-offs involved. Finally, we suggest that all of the above concepts are straightforward enough for average clinicians to calculate and understand.1,2


Challenges in developing feasible and cost-effective therapies for use in LMICs

Chowdhary et al conducted the research reported in their paper1 under the aegis of PREMIUM (a Program for Mental Health Interventions for Under-Resourced Health systems) in India. They state the overall aim of this programme in their introduction: ‘to investigate a systematic, reproducible method for developing psychological treatments that incorporate global evidence, are contextually appropriate and can be delivered by non-specialist health workers’. In this paper, the authors set out to develop an intervention to be delivered by lay health workers, with the intention of addressing the treatment gap for mental health. The elaborate methodology they adopted to develop this intervention requires a highly skilled research team such as their own. There are simpler and more economical methods for cultural adaptation of evidence-based therapies2,3 that have been tested in similar cultures and well described. We are not clear about the rationale for their use of a complex and expensive methodology, given the aim of a ‘reproducible method for developing psychological treatments’. The authors started with a pool of techniques that were considered to be useful. These techniques were mostly based on cognitive–behavioural therapy (CBT). However, based on expert advice, they adapted the manual Behavioral Activation for Depression: A Clinician’s Guide. A massive evaluation found this intervention to be unfeasible. Therefore, they further adapted the intervention and tested it in a pilot study. The title of their paper does not reflect the fact that this was an adaptation of an existing intervention and not the development of a new intervention. They used a complex, time-consuming and resource-intensive process that is highly unlikely to be repeatable in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

We have adapted CBT for the local population in Pakistan and for the ethnic minority population in England.2,3 These methods of adaptation have been described in detail and have been tested for depression1 and schizophrenia,5,6 and in a guided self-help format for depression.8 The methodology evolved over the years, resulting in the development of semi-structured interviews that can be conducted by students and easily analysed using a framework analysis method.2 This low-cost methodology is being used in China and the Middle East to adapt CBT. We hope the authors find this work useful in their future attempts to adapt therapy.

The issue of cost becomes even more important in the delivery of therapy. In our two-pronged approach, therapy in secondary care was delivered by psychology graduates (with a typical monthly salary of $200) and by carers using a culturally adapted CBT-based self-help manual developed locally. No financial help was provided to the carers. We believe it is not just the development or adaptation of an intervention that is important; it should also be deliverable by existing mechanisms. This leads to our second concern: how practical it is to create a new workforce of lay therapists in a low-income country? This lack of understanding of the ground realities has possibly resulted in minimal change
in health settings in LMICs. For example, to the best of our knowledge, the Thinking Healthy programme3 – contrary to initial hopes – is not currently being practised in mainstream healthcare in any part of Pakistan. There is a need for researchers in this area to consider the local resources. Otherwise, there is a risk that highly funded programmes will not produce realistic evidence that they can address the treatment gap. We, therefore, believe the paper by Chowdhary et al describes a strategy that is not consistent with the current methods of culturally adapting therapy, and one that is too costly to be replicated in LMICs.


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Author’s reply: Naeem et al express two concerns regarding the rationale for the work described in our paper on the development and piloting of the Healthy Activity Program (HAP), a brief psychological treatment that can be delivered by non-specialist workers in primary healthcare settings for adults with severe depression: first, that the methodology adopted was expensive and cumbersome; and second, that the delivery of the intervention is not scalable in terms of human resources.

The goal of the PREMIUM approach was to design a treatment that was based on both contextual as well as global evidence, and that could be delivered by non-specialist workers in routine healthcare settings.2 In both these ways, the PREMIUM approach is distinct from that adopted by Naeem and colleagues, whose trials adapted an existing psychotherapy package and evaluated the treatment in tertiary facilities or in psychiatric out-patients in large urban settings that cater to an unrepresentative and tiny fraction of the population burden of mental disorders. Our finding that behavioural activation was the most appropriate theoretical approach for treatment was a consequence of our methodology rather than an a priori decision and is, in fact, a significant scientific contribution in its own right in two ways: first, in the light of the approach taken, it demonstrates that this theory has cross-cultural validity; and second, it shows that there is no need for the more cumbersome cognitive components of the full package of CBT, a finding that is aligned with the common elements approach being increasingly favoured as a key strategy for the dissemination of psychological treatments.3 It is true that the methodology we adopted was time-consuming, as we were not to know when we started that our final output would resemble an established psychological treatment; it is as the result of this experience that we have been to identify those steps of the PREMIUM methodology that are crucial to designing scalable treatments, reducing the resource requirements for replicating this approach for other mental health conditions.

With regard to scaling up of empirically supported psychological treatments, it is absolutely correct that the treatments should be designed to be deliverable by existing health personnel. This was precisely the goal of PREMIUM. The problems of scaling up psychological treatments are not unique to LMICs; indeed, there is virtually no country in the world in which it has happened, even those with abundant mental health professionals, barring exceptions such as the UK’s Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme. The human resources that deliver treatments such as HAP and the Thinking Healthy Programme (THP),4 which Naeem et al allude to, are in plentiful supply in all countries, significantly more so than mental health professionals, and the next challenge for our field is to scale up these empirically supported treatments in the real world. This goal is being facilitated by a number of new opportunities, including the collaborative hubs for scaling up evidence-based mental health interventions established by the US National Institute of Mental Health (http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/parefiles/Par-16-174.html) and its ongoing support for evaluating the delivery of the THP through peers in India and Pakistan;5 the World Health Organization’s programme on low-intensity psychological treatments, which has adopted the THP to be scaled up through its Mental Health Gap Action Programme (mHGAP) and is being implemented in dozens of countries around the world; and national policy initiatives, such as in India, to reorient community health workers to deliver mental healthcare. It would be fair to say that it is precisely the systematic development of interventions such as the THP and HAP, with exquisite sensitivity to context and embedding in front-line healthcare delivery platforms, and their subsequent evaluation in definitive trials with impressive clinical results (the HAP definitive trial is currently in review)6 that has fuelled these initiatives. It remains a mystery why Naeem et al believe that their approach, focused on tertiary facilities in urban areas and provision by mental health professionals, is more scalable than the approach of task-sharing by primary and community health workers championed by global mental health, and exemplified by the methodology used to design the THP and HAP.

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