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Letter to the Editor

Is the comparison of Indian research output to well-known centers a global ranking?

Dear Sir,

It was sobering to read the insightful article "The research output from Indian medical institutions between 2005 and 2014" by Drs. Samrat Ray, Ishan Shah, and Samiran Nundy.[1] The article brings into focus the current state of medical research in India, remarkably incongruous with the achievements of Indian doctors in the clinical domain. We congratulate the authors on their thorough analysis and lucid writing. The findings have rightly received wide coverage in the lay press[2–6] and generated a much-needed conversation, especially on social media, about the need to improve research output from Indian institutions.

However, some news outlets have reported the study findings differently than others.[2,3] Specifically, these reports present the comparison of Indian research output to some well-known global centers in the form of a ranking of top 10 global institutes – "Four medical colleges in India are among the top 10 global institutions that published the most research between 2004 and 2014".[2] To our knowledge and interpretation, the original research article makes no such claim. This may lead to confusion among readers about the correct context in which to view Indian research output. The fact that Indian institutions are among the top 10 global centers in terms of research output runs counter to the central thesis of the article that their overall output is poor.

It is apparent from Table 3 and accompanying text of the original article that the authors are presenting a comparison to well-known global centers, to contextualize the output of Indian medical colleges. However, it may be necessary to state that these statistics do not constitute and should not be interpreted as a global ranking of research output. This becomes apparent from the wide gap in research output between the purportedly 2nd (Mayo Clinic, 37,633) and 3rd (AIIMS, 11,377) ranked institutes. A cursory look at the research output of only the common clinical specialties from other well-known centers such as Johns Hopkins University (34,190 publications including articles, meeting abstracts, reviews, proceedings papers, and book chapters, searched on Web of Science, 2005–2014) and University of California, Los Angeles (27,230) shows that the ranking being presented in the lay press may be misleading.

It would be helpful to the debate and conversation around this topic if the authors could clear the air on this matter and state the intent behind the global comparison more clearly – is the comparison presented in the original article actually a global ranking? If so, it would also be useful to share their data on output from the other prominent academic hospitals globally which were considered for the ranking, such as the hospitals of the Johns Hopkins University and the University of California, Los Angeles, to take just two examples.

It is understandably not within the purview of the authors of the original article to monitor how their data are interpreted and communicated by the press in general. If the news reports are misinterpreting data, correcting them would perhaps be best achieved by providing a clear response at the source itself. The authors have done a remarkable job of presenting the state of research output from Indian institutions, and these findings deserve to be disseminated to all stakeholders accurately. We would like to again congratulate and thank the authors for their efforts.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing financial interests.

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