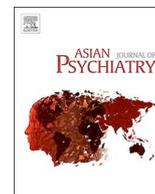




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Letter to the Editor

Schizophrenia: A disorder in search of a new name



Sir

Schizophrenia is a chronic mental disorder with variable outcomes. As with other health conditions, awareness and knowledge of the disorder influences how sufferers live with it. An accessible and appropriate name for a disorder is the first step in the definition and dissemination of knowledge regarding an illness (Fukuda et al., 2015). Lately there have been calls for the name of schizophrenia to be replaced with something more appropriate due to reasons such as stigma and scientific impreciseness (Keshavan et al., 2013; Lasalvia et al., 2015). While these are valid reasons, they often overlook the importance of semantic factors that are particularly relevant in a country such as India.

Schizophrenia when treated as a nosological entity is a product of western biomedicine, therefore equivalent semantics in other cultures present something of a problem. Some countries such as Japan and Korea translated the term schizophrenia into the vernacular (Mind-split disease into Seishin Bunretsu Byo) and used it (SATO, 2006). In countries such as India the local equivalents of specific nosological entities such as schizophrenia has always been unsatisfactory. The semantics of modern medical communication have been informed by colonial influences. While this may be adequate for illnesses such as malaria and typhoid that have entered local idiom as is, this is clearly not the case with schizophrenia.

In the absence of serious attempts to translate schizophrenia into local approachable idioms, efforts to communicate with patients and public regarding schizophrenia have taken one of the following forms.

Often schizophrenia is replaced with a more generic term of psychosis. While this may be scientifically appropriate, these names are not approachable or acceptable by many people. This can be exemplified by the acceptance for terms such as ‘high B.P.’ or ‘hypertension’ and ‘sugar’ or even ‘diabetes’ by those who do not know English even when appropriate Hindi equivalents exist (‘ucch rakt chaap’ and madhumeha for hypertension and diabetes respectively). This is clearly not the case with the term ‘schizophrenia’ which has never caught on in public discourse. This may be because the name itself is perceived as difficult or difficult to memorise and is not used commonly enough in the society to serve as a constant reminder. On the other hand specific diseases such as malaria and typhoid are known as such and are widely understood and have entered local idiom as is. The popularity of these names may be due to the fact that these diseases are highly prevalent and are commonly diagnosed and communicated as such. As a result medical communication with regards to these is more precise and effective as the recipients are aware of what is being communicated.

Another common observation is the use of terms such as ‘depression’ or ‘tension’ for a variety of conditions signifying psychological distress

ranging from anxiety to schizophrenia. While these terms are commonly used, these are done inaccurately and imprecisely. While a Hindi equivalent for depression (Avsaad) is available, it too is not commonly used.

Finally terms such as ‘pagal’ are also often used by lay people but this roughly translates as ‘mad’, is non-specific, deeply stigmatising and therefore clearly inappropriate.

In such a scenario the absence of an appropriate name for schizophrenia is a major hurdle in any mental health literacy endeavour. This is because any messaging that uses this term is likely not to be understood or be misunderstood by the intended recipients.

There have been calls and discussion about whether schizophrenia needs to be renamed because of reasons such as stigma or scientific accuracy (Kingdon et al., 2007; Lieberman and First, 2007). Countries such as Japan and Korea renamed schizophrenia to less stigmatising names with appropriate results (Lee et al., 2013; Sartorius et al., 2014). However sight is often lost of the fact that in many parts of the world appropriate names of schizophrenia simply do not exist or are not widely accessible.

Schizophrenia is a disorder that is in search of a new name that is more accessible and understandable so as to make mental health literacy and medical communication with patients more effective.

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