A National Emergency In Children’s Mental Health!

The American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry has declared a national emergency in children’s mental health. Mental health issues have been steadily gaining ground over the last decade, but the COVID pandemic has catapulted it to centre stage. In early 2021, suicide attempts by girls between 12-17 years rose by 51% compared to 2019. Emergency visits for mental health issues rose by 24% in children between 5-11 years and 31% in children 12-17 years between March and October, 2020.

Isolation, lack of social interaction, which had been possible in school, death of family members and excessive exposure to social media and online entertainment are considered some of the possible causes. One possible solution to this complex problem is physical sports. A study comparing the rates of mild to moderate depression in athletes, pre- and post-pandemic found a jump from 10% to 33%. Another study found a whopping 37% incidence of anxiety after the pandemic started. The American Academy of Pediatrics has recommended safe participation in sports and given guidelines for pediatricians to enforce this. They have also suggested that mental health surveillance be integrated into every hospital visit. Techniques to promote resilience like mindfulness, progressive relaxation and meditation are other methods which may be employed. (www.aap.org)

Clinician scientists - a new breed

The Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, which is a premier research institute has now decided to start a Postgraduate Medical College and multi-speciality hospital. They will offer a new kind of course called integrated MD-PhD dual degree. This aims to train physicians in both clinical and research methodology. Students will have access to state of the art medical facilities as well as science and engineering laboratories. It is anticipated to kickstart cutting edge research in several fields such as oncology, neurology, robotics, organ transplant etc.

Philantropists Susmita and Subroto Bagchi as well as Radha and NS Parthasarathy have contributed 425 crores for this. IIT Kharagpur is the second technical institute which will be starting a medical institute. This amalgamation of medical and technical sciences may open the floodgates of research in the biological sciences in India. (The Times of India 14 February 2022)

The MELODY trial for RSV

Nirsevimab is a long acting monoclonal antibody against the fusion protein of the respiratory syncytial virus. In the phase III MELODY trial recently published – a single dose of Nirsevimab reduced the incidence of medically attended RSV infections by 74.5%. The other option so far had been Palivizumab, another monoclonal antibody, which could protect infants for only 1 month and needed 5 doses to cover the entire RSV season. The secondary end point of the trial was hospitalizations. This occurred in 6 infants (0.6%) in the nirsevimab group and in 8 infants (1.6%) in the placebo group (P=0.07). Nirsevimab has also been used in high risk infants with congenital heart disease and chronic lung disease and shown adequate safety and tolerability.

Since the lifting of curbs after the COVID pandemic, there was a spike in RSV infections in 2021. Nirsevimab may offer a ray of hope, especially to high risk premies. (NEJM 3 March 2022)

Upper age limit for NEET-UG entrance removed

Since 2017, there had been an upper age limit for appearing in the national eligibility-cum-entrance test for undergraduate training (NEET-UG) in India. It was 25 years for unreserved candidates and 30 years for reserved candidates. This has now been scrapped by the National Medical Commission.

Prior to the NEET, the age cut-off in the AIPMT exam applied to only 15% of the seats. When the NEET phased out the AIPMT, this age limit became applicable to all seats. This was challenged in May, 2018 in the Supreme Court. The petitioners felt the rule was unfair to women and candidates from underprivileged backgrounds, who may not be able to follow the same timeline as others. The removal of the age limit will allow more candidates to apply including those who missed the age cutoff due to delay or postponement of examinations, which occurred in 2021 and 2022. (The Indian Express 10th March 2022)

Gouri Rao Passi

gouripassi@hotmail.com

Clinician scientists - a new breed

The Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, which is a premier research institute has now decided to start a Postgraduate Medical College and multi-speciality hospital. They will offer a new kind of course called integrated MD-PhD dual degree. This aims to train physicians in both clinical and research methodology. Students will have access to state of the art medical facilities as well as science and engineering laboratories. It is anticipated to kickstart cutting edge research in several fields such as oncology, neurology, robotics, organ transplant etc.

Philantropists Susmita and Subroto Bagchi as well as Radha and NS Parthasarathy have contributed 425 crores for this. IIT Kharagpur is the second technical institute which will be starting a medical institute. This amalgamation of medical and technical sciences may open the floodgates of research in the biological sciences in India. (The Times of India 14 February 2022)