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Qualitative research in medicine – An art to be nurtured

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ABSTRACT

To acquire complete knowledge on a subject both qualitative and quantitative research methods need to be perused by researchers. However, over the period of time qualitative research teaching among medical professionals has reduced. Wisdom amongst doctors seems getting muddled in 'data'. Operational research as well as health systems research have been the basis of 'key' policy changes in situations and programmes including polio immunization to achieve desired objectives. Both qualitative and quantitative methods complement each other and cannot replace one another. We need to protect the 'endangered art' of qualitative research before it becomes extinct from medical schools.

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Introduction

Qualitative research is a form of social enquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live. Qualitative research has been defined by Denzin et al.¹ as "Situating activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible. These practices turn the world into a series of representations including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them." Though teaching of research methodology to residents

and faculty in three day basic course has become a mandatory requirement in many health universities in India, however perusal of the content will show that most of the curriculum is centred on quantitative research. Qualitative research is given only a slot of 45 min and the faculty teaching the same ends up only giving an overview due to acute paucity of time. Having said that it is admitted that increasing the content of qualitative research syllabus in this 3 day course may compromise on the already condensed quantitative research element in this course. There is deficiency of trained core group of qualified researchers in the medical field. Academicians need to work out a feasible strategy to get over this dilemma. The teaching of qualitative research in medical colleges in India has thus taken a backseat. As a result, the faculty or students clamour only for quantitative research methods in planning or executing research, MD or PhD dissertations in medical schools.

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In case this trend is not checked, qualitative research will gradually be elbowed out of medical research. This can have serious consequences for the advancement of medical sciences and provision of Public Health in the country. One is not at conflict with 'quantitative research'. It definitely is an important methodology for research. However, it should be understood that both qualitative and quantitative methods are complimentary and that using both approaches will help us obtain a more complete understanding of the issues and outcomes of clinical and health systems research.²

Qualitative research: a doctor's natural forte

"Conversational interviewing" is an approach in which researchers talk with research participants to generate verbal data.³ This approach has been described as "guided conversation", "conversation with a purpose", "directed conversation" and "professional conversation", irrespective of the theoretical orientation.³ Similar approach is used by doctors and health care professionals in form of 'History taking' to generate diagnosis of patients and has been considered as most important step in formation of clinical diagnosis. The art of 'History taking' is imbibed in a doctor during the initial formative years in medical colleges and comes naturally to the doctor while examining patients. Further, qualitative research has the ability to investigate preferences, beliefs and attitudes of patients and the question of how evidence is turned into practice.⁴

However, Banerjee⁵ has observed that wisdom which came naturally to our profession has somehow got muddled in data. Hippocrates in his 'Airs, waters and places', while cajoling the medical profession to undertake research writes that while doing such "investigations" one should 'consider' all aspects. He did not use the word 'count' but 'consider' thereby stressing on qualitative methods.⁶

Focussing purely on quantitative methods is akin to treating a patient purely based on investigations. By taking such an approach, one is actually losing out on one's forte which is detailed clinical history and examination. Thus qualitative research methods should come naturally to a doctor. However, the glamour of quantification in research has not only dimmed our 'sixth sense' (call it 'hunch' or 'common sense') but has also contributed to the ever expanding market of computer software. It is imperative that both qualitative and quantitative research should go hand in hand and not at the expense of one another, to contribute to the scientific advancement in the field of medicine.

Synonyms in qualitative research

Two well-known methods of research are synonymous with qualitative research – operational research and health systems research.

Operational research

Operational research is an important technique for understanding social phenomenon with a view to plan intervention.

Operational research was recognised as a significant activity for the first time during World War II in response to military needs and was called as Operational analysis/evaluation.⁷ While carrying operational research in Armed Forces, all inputs like terrain of operations, enemy and own capability, logistics (including medical support, etc) were taken into consideration by the Senapati/Commander to plan his attack/defence. This kind of planning uses all the methods of qualitative research viz. observation (enemy activity), in depth interviews, key informant interviews (done by intelligence agencies), focus group discussions with brother officers and case studies (military history of battles in similar conditions).

Qualitative research is essentially participatory and subjective. Proponents of "Quantitative research" attempt to score a point over qualitative research by calling the former 'unbiased', 'objective' and therefore 'evidence based'. Overzealous use of this approach can land one in a situation wherein statistical inputs could substitute for common sense. A well conducted focus group discussion can give far more meaningful results about how a healthcare intervention is functioning, than mere 'data' often 'tortured' to get the end results that were probably decided before data collection started. Systematic review of studies on association of funding by pharmaceutical companies and results of clinical trials has clearly brought out this point wherein it has proved that an overwhelming number of drug trials were designed and conducted, analysed and result published to suit the interest of pharmaceutical industry.⁸

Let us take an example. Randomised Controlled Trials in 1985 showed that beta blockers reduce mortality among Acute Myocardial Infarction (MI) patients.⁹ However, despite evidence, till 2000, various studies found that beta blocker use had huge variations and were underused in many hospitals.⁹ This context formed basis of operational research using qualitative study design to find the factors determining usage of beta blockers among Acute MI patients by hospitals. In depth interviews with hospital staff including physicians, nurse and administrative staff found 4 broad factors leading to greater improvements of beta blocker usage by hospitals. These were 'shared goals of improvement', 'substantial administrative support', advocating beta blocker use by 'strong physician leadership' and 'credible data feedback' systems.⁹ Thus identification of factors leading to greater beta blocker use helped plan appropriate strategies and approaches for better care of Acute MI patients and also described a taxonomic classification for classification and evaluation of such efforts.⁹

Health systems research

India has been declared 'polio free' after 3 years of zero reporting of polio cases from the country. It has been considered a remarkable achievement for the country as it was thought that India will be among the last countries to eliminate polio because of its varied terrains and vast geographical variations. This has been possible because of 'Pulse Polio campaigns' and surveillance activities which formed the backbone for achieving 'elimination' of Polio. The surveillance used qualitative research techniques for

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