Researching schizophrenia on global and local scales: quantitative and qualitative research initiatives

Alessandra Grillo
Clinical Research Assistant, Department of Psychiatry
Boston University School of Medicine & Boston Medical Center, Boston, MA

Introduction
Boston University School of Medicine (BUSM) and its affiliate hospital, Boston Medical Center (BMC), are dedicated to the intersection of education, research, and clinical practice. Within the Department of Psychiatry, there is great emphasis that clinical practice and psychiatric research innovation exist in a symbiotic relationship, with each informing the other. Department initiatives include psychopharmacological clinical trials that aim to ameliorate symptoms of psychiatric illness, such as of schizophrenia, while also investigating cultural schizophrenia on a local and global scale. Located in Boston’s historic South End, BUSM and BMC’s surrounding patient population is rich in ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural diversity, and thus informs the domain of cultural psychiatry.

Activity
My official title was Clinical Research Assistant, though my research contributions permeated into domains of global research and global mental health initiatives. I supported an ongoing trial that investigates the use of a Long-Acting Injectable (LAI) form of the atypical antipsychotic Aripiprazole in patients with schizophrenia classified as non-adherent to medication. I recruited patients in outpatient psychiatry at BMC, measured manual vital signs, performed blood draws, assisted in psychiatric cognitive test administration, and entered clinical data. In terms of departmental global mental health research initiatives, most of my efforts went towards the organization, execution, and attendance of an international psychiatry conference in Cape Town, South Africa. The conference was a meeting between American and African psychiatrists to discuss contemporary mental health challenges facing residents of Africa. The conference was foundational for the establishment of the Africa Global Mental Health Institute, which aims to close the gap in global mental health disparities.

Outcomes
While on co-op, I learned the process of truly operationalizing a clinical trial, from IRB approval, to initiation of the study. I formulated RedCap databases, which house clinical data in an efficient and secure way, that are still in use. In terms of global research initiatives, I contributed to a manuscript on using Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) to assess attitudes towards mental health and potential gaps in mental healthcare resources in Lowell, MA, a city with a large population of Western African immigrants. Essentially, results from previous qualitative studies performed by the department in Liberia informed the study in Lowell, MA, and showed how global mental health studies can inform local natures of that country, and vice versa. This is transformative in lessening disparities in mental health.

Reflection
It is almost unfathomable the amount of experience, knowledge, and insight I gained during my third and final co-op. On a knowledge acquisition level, I learned extensively about phenotypic presentations of schizophrenia, but beyond that, I harnessed an understanding of cultural schizophrenia. Symptomatology presentation varies by culture, and therefore a comprehensive understanding of the patient’s experience as it relates to their ethnicity supports proper diagnosis. I am more informed of global mental healthcare disparities, specifically in Sub-Saharan Africa countries, and disparities as they relate to gender. I would say this was one of the biggest career revelations, as I now understand the importance of African global mental health research from a public health perspective based on my time at BUSM Department of Psychiatry. This has informed my career path to pursue a MD, MPH combined degree.

As I was given opportunities to contribute to a manuscript and also create a presentation for the Director of Research, my writing skills were tested and consequently, elevated. Thus, I learned that I am capable of meeting content expectations of faculty and can deliver a higher-level presentation. Additionally, the clinical skills I developed are valuable as an aspiring physician.

Lastly, I did not know entering this co-op that I would travel to South Africa, which was the most shocking and invaluable experience of this co-op. I experientially understood the current state of psychiatric health through lenses of renowned African psychiatrists. I feel more well-rounded in mental health and look forward to continuing on my refined career path using the knowledge gained from my time at BUSM/BMC.

Acknowledgements
Thank you to Dr. David Henderson, Dr. Christina Borba and Claire Oppenheim for the knowledge, experience, and opportunities you have given me at BUSM/BMC. Thank you to Kelsey Johnson, the other co-op who taught me the value of “divide and conquer.”

AGMHI logo & website QR code
Designed by BUSM interns

Attendees of the African Diaspora Global Mental Health Conference, November 2016
Photo by Century City Conference Centre

Camps Bay, Cape Town, South Africa, November 2016
Photo by A. Grillo