

EDITORIAL

Research Initiative in SARPS Countries: Fostering Pathways for Sustainable Development

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The South Asian Regional Pain Society (SARPS), founded in 2003, attained the official status of a Federation-in-formation of the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) in 2020. It encompasses five member countries from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) region; Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. The society aims to address the unique pain management challenges in these countries, which often face limited resources and varying levels of healthcare infrastructure, by fostering a collaborative environment¹.

The Primary objective of SARPS is to supports its member countries in providing effective, accessible, affordable, and ethical care to individual suffering from pain conditions while also enhancing research collaboration across the region. The purpose of SARPS research initiative is to create actionable knowledge that can guide policymaking and implementation of sustainable practices for better health care in Pain Medicine across our region¹.

The research initiatives led by SARPS focus on both clinical and basic science aspects of pain. We have initiated conferences and workshops for pain physicians and other professionals to improve their understanding and treatment of pain in an evidence-based era. The absence of health data related to Pain medicine presents significant challenges in research, development, and delivery of pain care. Additionally, there is a lack of comprehensive data regarding types of pain conditions and Pain treatment facilities available in South Asia².

A defining feature of the SARPS research initiative is its emphasis on identifying barriers to research and designing appropriate strategies through fostering collaboration. Recognizing that the issues are complex and interconnected, a multidisciplinary approach is essential to overcoming the following challenges³:

- Lack of financial and human capacity
- Competing demands
- Ethical and regulatory system obstacles
- Lack of research environment
- Operational barriers

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A key barrier is the "lack of funding," as governments in this region allocate meager resources for research and overall health. Human capacity building is crucial for enhancing research capabilities, but several obstacles exist in this area. These include a lack of awareness about the essential needs of relevant research for healthcare, excessive clinical workloads, insufficient staff and

training opportunities, limited research experience and skilled personnel, inadequate mentorship, and poorly prepared graduates from medical schools and teaching hospitals to conduct research³.

Physicians in our region are overstretched with patient care responsibilities due to a critically low physician-to-patient ratio. Competing demands, particularly the lack of time for research, have emerged as significant barriers. It is well known that most physicians worldwide face competing priorities that necessitate their focus on clinical care. To maintain a balance between clinical practice and research, it is proposed that busy physicians in this region develop specialized teams dedicated to providing high-end clinical care and conducting quality research. In this model, physicians would take on leadership roles to supervise and guide these teams. Unnecessary delays in ethical approval procedures and overly complex, excessively strict government regulatory systems are common hindrances. Certain cultural and religious beliefs in this region create fears of exploitation, complicate patient recruitment, and involve unskilled authorities in the review process, posing significant barriers to conducting clinical research. I strongly believe that governments in these countries need to implement changes to reduce approval times and streamline regulatory processes to attract more funding for research^{1,3}.

The region faces a lack of suitable research infrastructure, materials, and facilities for conducting research, as well as a lack of a conducive scientific atmosphere and understanding of policy implementation. Significant investment is needed in research infrastructure and research-based higher education centres. I believe SARPS should develop strategies that work across all countries in the region to address these issues¹.

In South Asia, there are several misconceptions and wrong perceptions about the need for research. Many do not recognize the vital role that research plays in advancing healthcare, education, and overall societal progress. This lack of awareness contributes to the inadequate setting of national priorities for health, education, and research, resulting in these critical areas like pain medicine receiving insufficient attention and funding.

Moreover, many countries in the region suffer from a lack of robust higher education systems and effective governance. This deficiency hampers the development of a knowledgeable and skilled workforce capable of conducting high-quality research in pain medicine. Additionally, there is a significant shortage of healthcare facilities and infrastructure, especially for pain treatment, which further impedes the ability to carry out necessary research and provide adequate pain care. Additionally, this region faces a severe brain drain due to its geopolitical and economical situation. Many talented individuals leave the country in search of better opportunities abroad, which depletes the nation's intellectual resources and further weakens its research capabilities³.

Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort through SARPS to raise awareness about the importance of pain research. It is essential to establish clear priorities for pain treatment and research, improve higher education and governance systems, and invest in healthcare and research infrastructure. Only through such measures can SARPS countries hope to retain their talent and build a sustainable research environment.

Although there are many similarities, there are also variations within SARPS countries regarding the barriers they face in research. It is time to take an honest look at our current research landscape and find ways to overcome these obstacles. Learning and adapting best practices at all levels, systemic, organizational, and individual, could be highly beneficial. Establishing collaboration among these countries through SARPS to address various challenges and barriers is crucial. We need to develop strategies to overcome existing obstacles by:

- Providing infrastructure, mentoring support, and capacity building
- Advocating for streamlined ethical, regulatory, funding, and other processes.
- Facilitating different operational processes from initiation to final report

By implementing these strategies, we can create a more conducive environment for research and development across these countries.

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