EDITORIAL

Is the journal a place for debates?

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Is there a place for debates on important issues within this Journal? In our last issue, a special section of the Journal presented different understandings of the relationship between child mental health and the Covid-19 pandemic, with particular interest in school closures (1-5). It was structured as an invited commentary with three rejoinders, followed by a rebuttal. It is not the purpose of this editorial to summarize or rehash the ideas raised in that special section, but rather to reflect on the structure and process of this recent effort to inform how best to approach future debates, if at all.

One key issue was how best to facilitate the back-and-forth of a debate within a journal. As we are a quarterly journal, we thought it would be undesirable from a presentation and reader perspective to spread the back-and-forth across multiple issues as this would result in long gaps within a single debate. Consequently, we facilitated the back-and-forth within a single issue which came with some of its own challenges. In particular, this decision entailed having to limit the time allowed to the different author groups to review the others’ positions, prepare their responses, and have the responses reviewed and requested revisions addressed. This time pressure may have the consequence that component pieces may not be as well developed and critiqued as might be accomplished in stand-alone pieces not needing to fit together with other pieces in a single issue. An additional challenge was finding a balance in the length of the different sections to allow adequate space to develop key ideas, but not so long that succinct presentations of central points are not well realized. Maintaining confidentiality of component pieces over many months on contested topics when contributions and responses need to be shared between different author groups presented another challenge.

What might be an alternative? The Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry facilitated a debate in 2019 as to whether stimulants are effective for ADHD in the long-term. They had two authors, one argued against and one argue for (6,7). These were short, concise pieces written by leading experts on the subject matter, and were presented in the same issue. While a much more manageable format, it did not include rebuttals and hence an opportunity for weaknesses in the other’s points to be identified as one might see in a formal debate format.

Perhaps the best debate in child mental health that I have attended was many years ago at John Hopkins University in which Russell Barkley and Bill Pelham, two giants in the ADHD field, were on the stage together. Although not set up as a formal debate, the open discussion at the end of the formal lectures evolved such that the two provided critiques, in a cordial manner, of the weaknesses in each other’s statements. This nicely facilitated an advancement in my understanding that I would not otherwise have attained if I had just heard the individual lectures.

Clearly there is a need and role for debates in the field of child mental health, with no shortage of contentious issues with differing perspectives. However, is a journal the right place for these kinds of debates? Should they be left to settings that can facilitate more fluid back-and-forth discourse such as at live conferences, or more contemporarily with social media spaces. One of the hopes in providing the special section in the last issue was to try and provide a space for cordial academic discussion, differing from some discourse patterns that may occur in social media spaces with little to no structure and guardrails (8). Theoretically, journals could allow an academic lens and review process...
to such debates, however, they are not immune to passions and moral declarations which can undermine lofty journal aspirations. Tension may arise between authors, as well as readers, both existing in what are described as particularly polarized times. Ideally, this Journal could be a place for critical consideration of contested issues to advance our understanding of child mental health, but whether this can be realized is yet to be seen.

Now on to some highlights in this issue. Although not framed as a debate, the issue of weight, weight gain, and weight targets for atypical anorexia nervosa is considered in this issue. First in the form of a new research article by Quon & Kelly (9) and then further considered in a commentary by Loeb et al (10). We also have a commentary by Courtney (11) to extend the discussion on issues raised in two clinically oriented papers examining substance use and concurrent disorders in youth and young adults (12-13).

Also take a moment to consider other sections of this issue of the Journal, including an informative invited review on antiepileptic medication and child mental health by a pediatric neurologist (14), recent interesting research findings from adult depression studies in our Recommended Academic Reading (RAR) section, a conversation in our interview column, Apercevoir, with the partner of a psychiatry colleague who passed, as well as recommendations in our revised and newly named column, Community, Perspectives and Recommendations (CoPaR).

Finally, I would like to sincerely thank all our external reviewers from the last couple of years who have willingly volunteered their expert time to scrutinize the manuscripts we receive at the Journal. Please scan the list in this issue to see which of your colleagues have helped us out. We appreciate they are balancing many competing demands to support the peer-reviewed process.

References