Reviewer's report

Title: Food Policies for Mental Health

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Reviewer: Vijay K Ganju

Overview

The topic and the areas covered in the article are significant, and will, in all likelihood, grow in importance in the near future. In this sense, the authors are to be commended for focusing on a subject that warrants more attention.

However, the article itself is disjoint: the “messages” inherent in the article are not clear, and the relationships among them need both explication and clarification. It is not clear what the authors are advocating. At one level, it appears that the authors are advocating for the inclusion of mental illnesses in the global non-communicable diseases (NCD) agenda. While this is a worthy goal, it is not clear what the implications are for mental health except that there could be a serendipitous, positive fallout. At another, that reducing the prevalence of obesity could reduce the prevalence of mental illnesses; and yet another, that there may be a direct link between dietary patterns and the incidence of mental illnesses.

What exactly are the authors proposing in terms of “food polices for mental health”? It seems it is to follow the “food policies for NCDs”. If this is the case, through the unwitting “stealth” intervention, is the issue addressed or not addressed? What is the mechanism being proposed for “prevention” of mental illnesses: Is the reduction of dietary “risk factors of common mental disorders (CMDs)” those that are mediated through a reduction in risk factors for NCDs or are they different? And, how do these “food” policy interventions fit with other policies and plans to address the same goals of addressing issues related to mental illnesses?

The bottom line is that the authors need to be clear about the intent of the article. The article needs more internal coherence, the “messages” and the relationships among them need to be better specified, and the relationship of “food policies for mental health” need to be contextualized in other efforts related to improve mental health. I do not think that it is the intent of the authors to promote the idea that “food” policies for mental health are sufficient.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. Abstract: The focus of the abstract is on NCDs and how addressing NCDs may also concomitantly address mental disorders. There is no reference to “food policies for mental health.” Also, the first sentence attributing the increasing prevalence of NCDs unilaterally to changes in the “global food system” is questionable. The increased prevalence of NCDs is often attributed to a growing
middle class in LMICs and to lifestyle changes (a point that is recognized in a subsequent section of the article) and not necessarily to “global food system.”

2. Background: Somewhat along the same lines, the first sentence “Globalisation of the food system … “ needs substantiation and a citation. Are unhealthy diets caused by the global food system or by lifestyle changes and choices made by individuals?

3. Changes to the food supply and global impact on health: Again the impact is attributed to “food systems” and the focus of this section is on the “obesity epidemic” and the increased prevalence of NCDs. The connection of this section with the broader argument of the article would be helpful.

4. Burden of disease related to mental disorders: This section reflects that projections are that the burden of disease related to mental disorders is significant, and growing. This growth is a trend “in parallel to the obesity epidemic.” What is the intent of the authors? Is this burden level being attributed to “food” and to the relationship with increased prevalence of obesity and of the major NCDs? My suggestion is that the authors reconsider the placement and the wording of this section. The information in this section is largely contextual in nature, underlining the importance of the need to address mental disorders in the framework of a global health agenda. Following the section on obesity and the current wording, this section could be misconstrued.

5. Food policy for mental health: This section on “food policy for mental health” essentially addresses a “food policy for the major NCDs.” The food policy for mental health is described as a “stealth intervention” riding on the coat-tails of a broader food policy. Does the food policy for NCDs address the needs of a food policy for mental health? Does something need to changed or added? This section is not clear what constitutes a food policy for mental health.

Discretionary Revisions

6. Title: Is this the appropriate title for this article? In the article, it is not clear what a “food policy” is, and therefore it is not clear what constitutes a “food policy for mental health.” In the literature, the relationship of good policies and global health are related to the impact of “big food”/agribusiness and their health impact, resulting in policy options of self-regulation, “partnerships” or some combination of both. This does not seem to be intention of this article. Another thrust in the literature are the emergent findings related to Omega-3 fatty acids and folate supplementation with depression and cognitive impairment, but this too does not seem to be a factor in the “food policy for mental health” being addressed here. At best, the article seems to imply that the food policy that needs to be addressed is the same as that of “a balanced diet.” Is this, in fact, the case? If so, a reconsideration of the title may be in order.

7. Food and mental health: This section addresses the central thesis of the article, emphasizing the connection implied in the title. (Tellingly, the title of the section is food and mental health, not for mental health.) My suggestion is that this section be revised so that the key aspects of the research findings are clearly delineated. Ideally, it would be helpful if the food policies for mental health could be related to these specific findings.
Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests