Sir:

I read with great interest M. M. Khan’s paper ‘Earthquake 2005: challenges for Pakistani psychiatry’, in the July 2006 issue of International Psychiatry (vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 21–23). It was heartbreaking to read of the state of mental health in Pakistan, but hope still remains as long as there are people putting in effort to rectify this. I agree that the Pakistani Psychiatric Society should play a more prominent role than it has up to now. At the same time, one should not underestimate the difficulties and obstacles in improving standards of mental health in a country where almost a third of the population live below the poverty line. We are also observing an increase in the incidence and prevalence of mental illness in that region, owing to growing insecurity, terrorism, economic problems, political uncertainty, unemployment and disruption of the social fabric. A feudal mind-set exists not only in the rural areas of the country but also in institutions of learning, where established psychiatrists do not promote or help junior doctors, for fear of either increased competition or of being replaced by the younger generation, but this puts patient care at stake. Not enough effort is being directed towards psychiatric research either, and there is no dedicated psychiatry journal in the country. According to Gadit (2006), the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, which was once published regularly from Lahore, has ceased to exist and the first issue of the journal of Pakistan Psychiatric Society, called JPPS, was published in the year 2003 but was blocked politically and not reproduced again.

Prejudice and nepotism are the major factors contributing to decline. The system, which is already fragile, is further destabilised when locally trained psychiatrists in Pakistan are recruited internationally as consultants, leaving behind an increasing doctor:patient ratio.

In principle, I also agree with Dr Khan that one-off programmes should be discouraged and solutions which help in the longer run should take priority. After graduating in Karachi, I was involved in a community mental health initiative with our head of department in 2001–02, at Manora, an island near Karachi in the Arabian Sea with a population of 25,000. The Manora Health Project was launched in 2000 and was working under the aegis of Department of Psychiatry, Hamdard University Hospital, with the objective of improving the general health of the population, but with a special emphasis on improvement of their mental health status. It was a centre which provided consultations with help junior doctors, for fear of either increased competition or of being replaced by the younger generation, but this puts patient care at stake. Not enough effort is being directed towards psychiatric research either, and there is no dedicated psychiatry journal in the country. According to Gadit (2006), the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, which was once published regularly from Lahore, has ceased to exist and the first issue of the journal of Pakistan Psychiatric Society, called JPPS, was published in the year 2003 but was blocked politically and not reproduced again.

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Last but not least, I think it is high time that in Pakistan there was a separate postgraduate college for each medical specialty.

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