

CBM, NIMHANS and NCBS develop CALM-Brain, India's first repository of psychiatric disorders

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CALM-Brain is the result of collaborative efforts of researchers at the Rohini Nilekani Centre for Brain and Mind (CBM), which is a partnership between the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS) and the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS), TIFR. CALM-Brain, a digital repository of data on brain structure and function from a range of psychiatric disorders. Clinicians and researchers aiming to study neuropsychiatric disorders can access and analyse this multi-modal dataset to better understand disease onset, progression and underlying biological changes leading to disease symptoms. It was launched by Rohini Nilekani, Chairperson of the Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies (RNP) which funds CBM, at NIMHANS. CALM-Brain is India's first-of-its-kind repository of clinical, neuro-imaging, behavioural, genetic and other datasets on five disorders: addiction, bipolar disorder, dementia, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and schizophrenia. This longitudinal data incorporates multiple modes of studying brain function in neuropsychiatric diseases: Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI), Near Infrared Spectroscopy (NIRS), electroencephalogram (EEG), observations of cognition, eye-tracking, genetic analyses of blood samples and clinical assessments. The dataset is also linked to a biorepository of stem cells, which can be used to perform biology research in psychiatry to understand the origins of such severe mental illnesses. Prof. LS Shashidhara, director, NCBS, says, "Given how complex the brain as an organ is and how our behavioural responses are continuously modulated based on prior experience and various physicochemical factors, only further fundamental research can help gain mechanistic insights to various psychiatric disorders." "We believe that the application of modern methods of data analysis to this dataset will help bridge the gap between these scales of analysis," said Prof. Raghu Padinjat, CBM co-ordinator at CBM-NCBS. "The primary goals of the project are to identify biological markers of severe psychiatric illnesses, which cut-across traditional diagnostic frameworks, said Prof. YC Janardhan Reddy, CBM co-ordinator, CBM-NIMHANS. Phase-wise patient data gathering for the CALM-Brain was initiated in 2016 by this group of researchers from NIMHANS and NCBS, as part of the Accelerator program for Discovery in Brain disorders using Stem cells (ADBS project) jointly funded by the Department of Biotechnology and the Pratiksha Trust. Currently, this repository contains data of over 2,700 participants from 1,100 families. "While technology is advancing at breakneck speed, studying the human brain and body takes immense time, effort and care. A data repository like CALM-Brain can only come together through the collaborative effort of multiple people and institutions. This is a moment to recognize and celebrate the power of diverse stakeholders coming together," said Rohini Nilekani, Chairperson, RNP. What makes CALM-Brain a unique data repository is its ethnic composition. It will enable multi-scale investigations into neuropsychiatric diseases with Indian population data, currently under-represented in existing global datasets, thereby redesigning the approach towards tackling mental illnesses in India. "Most global studies focus on individuals, specific disorders, a single biological investigation and are almost entirely Europe and North America-centric. South Asia and India have remained highly under-represented. With CALM-Brain, we will be able to tackle many of these limitations," said Prof. Biju Viswanath, NIMHANS. Prof. Upinder Bhalla, NCBS, who led the CALM-Brain project, said, "If we are able to obtain clinical insights into the population and its sub-population, this will contribute to understanding the disease better and plan patient-tailored treatment." Prof. Pratima Murthy, former director, NIMHANS, emphasized that sustaining longitudinal projects, like CALM-Brain, and maintaining the database require continuing efforts between multiple stakeholders.



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