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Attitudes and Myths of Undergraduate Medical Students on Taking Up Psychiatry as A Post Graduate Specialty – A Survey

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ABSTRACT

A survey in 200 medical students was carried out to assess the attitudes and myths of undergraduate medical students on taking up psychiatry as a post graduate specialty. The data was collected on a specially prepared self reporting voluntary and anonymous questionnaire and was statistically analyzed. All 200 medical students answered the entire questionnaire. 79.5% of medical graduates strongly agreed that psychiatric illnesses do need attention. Approximately 65% of the participants did not consider the psychiatrist equivalent to other doctors and believed that their job was quite challenging. 52% were open to the idea of choosing psychiatry as a career. 85% considered psychiatry a very respectable branch of medicine while 82% regarded it as a very scientific discipline. It was also heartening to note that 72% felt that psychiatric training increases their understanding of medical and surgical patients while 75% considered their undergraduate training valuable. Further studies in different medical college settings are needed to corroborate and generalize these findings.

KEYWORDS: attitudes, psychiatry, medical students, post graduate, myths

INTRODUCTION

Attitudes are supposed to be social judgments and are a complex mixture of cognitive, emotional and behavioral components. Social psychologists have traditionally viewed attitudes being made up of the above three components [1]. The cognitive component is made up of the beliefs that people hold about the object of an attitude. The affective component of an attitude consists of emotional feelings stimulated by an attitude object and the behavioral component of an attitude consists of predispositions to act in certain ways towards an attitude object. But several researchers have found that attitude behavior relations are not consistent [2].

Since time immemorial doctors have mirrored their attitude towards psychiatry. These are entrenched in the dungeons of their minds and still have to see the light of the day. The perception of a psychiatrist as a physician who "knows nothing and does nothing" is still prevalent as is the notion of mental illness as ill defined, incurable or trivial which often shapes the attitudes of interested medical students to that of despair [3]. The community perceptions of psychiatry affect the specialist interests of these students [4] and this is coupled with the stigma prevalent regarding psychiatric illness and patients [5].

In order to understand the prevailing attitudes of the medical students to psychiatry, especially after completion of a clinical posting in psychiatry and the factors responsible for their choice or rejection of psychiatry as a post graduate specialty and the intention of medical graduates to pursue psychiatry as a career, we decided to undertake this study.

MATERIAL & METHODS

The study was conducted during Jan – Feb 2013 in one of the teaching hospitals and medical college of Mumbai. The sample consisted of 200 medical students (3rd year) who had completed a posting in psychiatry. They had all undergone a clinical attachment of 15 days in psychiatry and had attended the lecture series in psychiatry in their third year.

Based on the prevailing beliefs amongst the medical fraternity about psychiatry, a semi-structured proforma was prepared in the form of a self reporting questionnaire with the questions pertaining to attitudes, myths, and the desire to pursue psychiatry as a post graduate subject. The questionnaire was validated by faculty of the hospital. The questionnaire was a lickert type questionnaire consisted of 23 questions, of which there were choices on which the student had to grade the answers and some questions were yes and no type. The students were instructed to tick one or more options whichever was applicable.

Each proforma had a brief introduction by the authors regarding the need for the study and anonymity was guaranteed. The questionnaire was then administered to 200 medical students all completed the entire questionnaire and so were included in the study. The results were then tabulated and analyzed by the means of frequency distribution.

RESULTS

159 (79.5%) of medical graduates strongly agreed that psychiatric illnesses do need attention as opposed to 1% who disagreed. 130 (65%) of medical graduates agreed to the fact that it is interesting to unravel the cause of psychiatric illnesses as opposed to 8% who disagreed. 132 (66%) of medical graduates disagreed that psychiatrists talk a lot but do very little. 90 (45%) of medical graduates disagreed that it is hard to think of psychiatrists equal to other doctors as their work is more challenging.

102 (51%) felt that psychiatrists get less job satisfaction than other medical professionals due to frequent relapses seen in psychiatric illnesses. 107 (53.5%) disagreed with the fact that psychiatry was unappealing and felt that it was an essential branch of medicine. 36% of the participants however did also express that psychiatry at times involved vague specualtions and less scientific theory. It was heartening to see that 132 (66%) felt psychiatry was an interesting subject and could be taught effectively in medical school forming an essential part of the medical curriculum.

31% students did feel that psychiatrists derived less satisfaction from their work while 65% at the same time felt that psychiatry training was an integral part of their undergraduate medical training. 57% also felt that a psychiatry posting helped them to develop a better understanding of human beings as well as medical and surgical patients. 80% felt

that psychotherapy is relevant while 95% felt that it is a very effective treatment modality. 90% felt that psychiatric patients were more interesting than medical patients and it was a challenge to unravel the cause of their illness. It was great to note that 104 (52%) wanted to take up psychiatry as a career. 85% considered psychiatry as a respectable branch of medicine. 80% felt that psychiatric treatments were effective treatment modalities.

DISCUSSION

The fact that psychiatry was considered essential was a refreshing change, as a positive attitude would help not only in learning but also considering it as a career choice. Many of the graduates expressed that the knowledge of psychiatry was applicable not only in daily life but also in medical practice. Psychiatry was considered to be intriguing but not a stigmatizing branch of medicine. A moderately positive attitude towards psychiatry was also studied previously by other authors [6].

It was also heartening to see a positive attitude towards psychiatrists who have otherwise been always been considered to be odd and eccentric and have more often than not invited skepticism from society and medical fraternity at large. Several researchers have found that exposure to psychiatry during the clinical attachment changed and improved attitudes towards psychiatry [7-8]. However the influence of media and peers that is an important source of attitude formation was not seen in our study.

Education has been founded on the basis of classroom teaching. In our study the medical graduates did feel that psychiatry teaching helped them to understand the subject better This would also mean that as educators we would have to address the improvement in skills in the psychosocial aspects of medical care. Hence psychiatric postings can play an important role in the development and evaluation of patients in many areas of the undergraduate curriculum in addition to the continuing education of the graduates. There are several studies that therefore evaluate the relevancy of the behavioural science curriculum and lay down the objectives of teaching [9].

Studies have reported that interaction with patients, seeing them respond, a better psychiatrist-patient relationship influenced attitudes of students to psychiatry and also evaluated clinical competency [10]. The clinical attachment period is the best to teach skills of good communication, patience, improving listening habits to have a better doctor-patient relationship. As psychiatrists it becomes our continuous endeavour to teach and elicit these skills for effective treatment of patients and handling their relatives [11]. Psychiatry as a prospective career option was considered by nearly half the study group. A choice of psychiatry has also been studied and certain factors have been found influential on the choice of psychiatry as a speciality [12-13]

In India, the future of psychiatry holds good as an erosion seems to have occurred in the last decade in the attitudes of the medical students towards psychiatry and today none of the psychiatry seats seems to be going vacant.

Certain caveats to the study however remain. It is a subjective evaluation with no rating measure in place. It is a retrospective evaluation of a clinical posting and memory biases may play a role in data gathering. It was uni-centered and cannot be generalized to medical colleges or views of medical students all over Mumbai or India. This study is a small step in the direction of further medical education based studies that need to be taken up in this regard.

Table – Questions answered in the proforma

QUESTIONS ASKED TO THE UNDERGRADUATES (Lickert type) Agree, Strongly agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree
Do you think psychiatric illnesses need attention.
Is it interesting to unravel the causes of psychiatric problems.
Do you think that psychiatrists talk a lot and do very little.
Are psychiatrists equal to other medical doctors.
Do you feel that psychiatrists get adequate job satisfaction.
Do you feel psychiatry is one of the top three exciting branches of medicine
Is psychiatry unappealing as it uses little scientific skills
Do you feel psychiatry is nothing but vague speculations.
Do you feel psychiatry is based on firm scientific foundations.
Do you feel psychiatric undergraduate training is valuable to doctors.
Do you feel psychiatrists derive more work satisfaction than other branches
Do you feel psychiatry is the most important aspect of medical school
Does psychiatry increase your understanding of medical patients as well.
Do you feel psychotherapy is a valid treatment.
Do you feel patients benefit from psychotherapy.
Are psychiatric hospitals equivalent to prisons.
Is psychiatric treatment really effective.
Would you like to take up psychiatry as a career.
Do you feel psychiatry is a respectable branch of medicine.
Do you feel psychiatry makes you run away from other branches of medicine

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