



Letter to the Editor

Attitude of medical graduates towards psychiatry: How will it change?



To the Editor,

We came across the an interesting article entitled “Assessing the attitudes of medical students towards psychiatry: A new paradigm” published in the Asian Journal of Psychiatry by Abdulrahman Alzahrani (Alzahrani, 2019). The author had evaluated 317 Saudi undergraduate medical students to understand their attitude towards psychiatry as a career option as well as the attitude towards psychiatric treatment. It is an important area, worthy studying. It is well known that across the globe very few medical graduates opt psychiatry as their career and negative attitude towards psychiatry are likely to influence the mental health care delivery, adversely.

However, it is encouraging to see that the overall attitude of the Saudi medical students towards psychiatry was positive one. The author had pointed out several possible reasons for the positive attitude. To mention some major reasons are – personal interests, academic opportunities, flexible working hours, shortage of mental health manpower and increasing demand, psychiatrist parents able to generate interest towards psychiatry among their children, financial rewards and feeling of socially responsible (Alzahrani, 2019). Most of these reasons are also present in India, too. In a survey conducted among 76 medical professionals (not medical students) in the national capital of India, revealed an overall positive attitude towards psychiatry (Jugal et al., 2007).

Another interesting finding of the study was, female students showing more positive attitude towards psychiatry than male students. Similar, findings were also reported in an Indian study (Prathaptharyan and Annatharyan, 2001). Evidences support that psychiatric education influencing the attitude of the medical students towards mental illness and psychiatry as a subject (Prathaptharyan and Annatharyan, 2001). In a recent Indian study, it was found that peer-learning, movies, internet, family, novels as important sources of mental health awareness among medical students (Kar et al., 2019). Majority of them are un-authentic sources and often portray psychiatry discipline and mental illness in a dramatizing manner. Unfortunately, there is no means to regulate this information from reaching general public including medical students. Hence, there is a need to expose students to mental health related information early in the educational curriculum, more so in the medical curriculum, which will improve the quality of mental health awareness and more likely improve the attitude towards psychiatry.

There are varying findings with regards to attitude of medical graduates towards psychiatry. In a recent Indian survey, it was found that only 13% of the trainee doctors, who perceive stress, seek the help of mental health professionals (Grover et al., 2019). It seems that the attitude is not translated to practice. Even if the medical professionals report a positive attitude, its reflection is not seen in their practice. Stigma, might be the hindering factor in reaching to seek help from mental health professionals. Education can create awareness, which in turn may help in combating stigma. In developing countries like India,

there is inadequate exposure of medical graduates to psychiatry. Psychiatry is not a separate medical subject in the undergraduate examinations, hence the focus of the medical graduates is likely to go away from it (Kar, 2015). Though the Medical Council of India attempted to strengthen the undergraduate psychiatry curriculum, its impact on the attitudes of the Indian medical graduates is yet to be seen. To meet the health care needs of the country, government approved many medical colleges in India and also increased the number of undergraduate and post-graduate seats in medical colleges. Despite of all these efforts, shortage of manpower in health sector, particularly in mental health sector is persisting in India. To meet these needs, Indian government had also proposed to initiate bridge-courses and also bringing the practitioners of alternative system of medicine to forefront to fill the gap. By all the above means, manpower can be generated but a positive attitude cannot be cultivated. Positive attitude is a personal affair. It is more of a choice. An individual's choices are often directed by the degree of awareness. Providing information at the right time for the sake of awareness will facilitate the individual's ability to choose a career in the right time. To generate interest towards psychiatry as a career, among the medical students, there is a need to introduce psychiatry early in the curriculum as well as introducing mental health related topics in the school and college curriculum.

Role of funding source

Nil.

Acknowledgements

Nil.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2019.07.026>

Received 26 June 2019

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Sujita Kumar Kar*

Department of Psychiatry, King George's Medical University, Lucknow, U.P.,
India

E-mail address: drsujita@gmail.com.

Chandra Sekhar Tripathy

Department of Psychiatry, M.K.C.G. Medical College, Brahmapur, Ganjam,
Odisha, India

* Corresponding author.