

Attitude of Medical Students at Sultan Qaboos University toward Psychiatry

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Abstract

Objectives: To examine the attitude of medical students at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) toward Psychiatry and the impact of factors such as age, gender, curriculum, clinical level, Psychiatry training, and experience of mental illness in self or family.

Methods: This is a cross sectional study conducted among medical students at the college of Medicine at Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman. All students from the Pre-clerkship, junior-clerkship and 7th year students were invited to participate in this study. The 30 items Attitude toward Psychiatry survey (ATP-30) was used. Data was analyzed using statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) version 19.

Results: A total of 269 students participated in the study (37% males and 63% females). The Attitude towards Psychiatry (ATP) was moderately positive and the positivity increased among the students who completed psychiatry rotation. The impact of demographic factors on the attitude was not statistically significant.

Conclusion: This study showed that medical students at Sultan Qaboos University have a positive attitude toward psychiatry.

Keywords: Attitude; Survey; Psychiatry; Medical students; Mental health stigma; Oman

Introduction

Psychiatry is defined by the national health services of United Kingdom (UK) as “a medical field concerned with the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mental health conditions” [1]. Countries around the world are developing their mental health services because of a high prevalence of Psychiatric disorders [2]. According to the WHO global observatory data report released in 2014, there is only one psychiatrist available to help every 100,000 people in 45% of the countries around the globe [3].

Therefore, the need for more trained psychiatrists is vital [4]. Knowing the attitude of medical students “who are the next workforces for Oman in the medical field” toward psychiatry is an essential step to promote psychiatry as an appealing option among other medical specialties. Worldwide, several studies examined the factors that influence student’s attitude toward Psychiatry. A study from Nigeria, found that teaching methods affected student’s attitude toward psychiatry [5]. In Kenya, a study found that, students exposed to Psychiatry had more negative attitude than those who did not [6].

Another study from Pakistan showed that female’s medical student had more positive attitude toward Psychiatry than males [7]. In the UK, Wilkinson et al. showed that students who complete Psychiatry training had more positive attitude toward Psychiatry [8], while Al-Ansari and Alsadadi from the Kingdom of Bahrain reported a negative relationship between a student age and ATP [9].

During this study period, the college of medicine and health science at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) had two different curricula for teaching medical students [10]. The old curriculum had 6 hours of behavioral science over two semesters in pre-clinical years whereas the new curriculum, which was implemented in 2008, did not have a separate behavioral science course in pre-clinical years. Therefore, in this study, the 7th year medical students are the only students who studied in the old curriculum.

Al-Adawi et al. [11] conducted a survey that examined the attitude

of medical students at SQU before and after their clinical rotation in psychiatry during the period of 2002-2004 using a 26 item questionnaire developed by Das and Chandrasena. The study reported that female students had more positive attitude than male students, however, there was no significant difference in students’ attitude before and after Psychiatry rotation.

This study differs from Al-Adawi study in that, it focused on academic and personal factors that may influence students’ attitude. It also included students from different curricula.

The objective of this study was to examine medical students’ attitude toward psychiatry and the impact of gender, completion of Psychiatry training, and experience of mental illness in self or family on Student’s attitude.

Method

This study followed STROBE (The Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology) reporting guidelines for observational studies [12].

Study design

This was a cross-sectional study.

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Setting and participants

This study conducted at the college of Medicine and health science at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). All clinical students, during 2012-2013 academic years, were invited to participate in this study. The principle investigators interviewed and distributed the questionnaire to the students in the medical library and during the free time in the college. There were no clinical students in senior clerkship and Pre-Internship during that academic year. Participants who declined to participate or submitted uncompleted questionnaires were excluded from the study.

Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee at College of Medicine and Health Sciences, at SQU. All students gave their written informed consent before enrollment. The collected data included, gender, clinical level, completion of psychiatry rotation or not, having a relative with mental illness or not and suffering from mental illness or not. The outcome which this study searched for were the attitude toward psychiatry and its relation with the above mentioned variables.

Data sources/measurement

The ATP (attitude towards psychiatry) questionnaire was used. This is a 30 items scale that was designed and validated in Canada by Burra et al. It has adequate face validity, construct validity, split half reliability and high test-retest reliability. The instrument has a good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.874) [13]. The scale was used across different countries in the original English form and has proven its validity [13]. It is divided into 4 major subscales: attitude to psychiatric patient and illness, attitude toward psychiatric institutions and psychiatrists, attitude toward psychiatric teaching and knowledge, and attitude toward psychiatric hospitals and treatments. The scale is a five-point Likert type that records responses of individuals (strong agreement, agreement, neutral, disagreement, strong disagreement). It comprises of 30 questions with 15 indicating positive attitude, which are scored from 5 to 1 and 15 indicative of negative attitude, scored reversely, higher score is indicative of more positive attitude. Those items were distributed randomly in the questionnaires. The scoring process was standardized and the cut off scores were arrived at after rigorous analysis carried out by Burra et al. [13]. Each point had specific indication: 1 indicated high negative attitude, 3 indicated neutral response and 5 indicated high positive attitude. Table 1 shows the cut off scores. Five general questions were added in order to measure the factors that affect ATP. The questionnaire was written in the English as it is the formal language of teaching at the College of Medicine.

Data collection

SPSS 19 was used to analyze the data and to generate standard deviations, descriptive statistics and means. Student T-test, Chi-square and ANOVA were used to compare the mean scores different groups. Covariates were adjusted to minimize the confounder's effect when assessing the linearity of correlation using multivariate leaner regression analysis. Individuals with missing data were excluded from the final analysis.

Results

Descreption of demographics

A total of 269 Students participated in the study. The response rate was 90.4%. Only 15 students were excluded because they submitted uncompleted forms. Table 2 shows number of student by their clinical level and gender. 63% of the study populations were female.

Global scores	Indication
30–150	Scores range
Less than 90 (scores of 1 and 2 combined)	Negative ATP
90 (average score of 3)	Neutral ATP*
More than 90 (scores of 4 and 5 combined)	Positive ATP
*Neutral ATP was meant to be the mid score, so it is not in range	

Table 1: Items scoring for APT.

Total	Female	Male n	Clinical Level
(36%)98	(68%)67	(32%)31	Pre-clerkship
(39%) 104	(65%) 68	(35%)36	Junior-clerkship
(25%)67	(51%)34	(49%)33	7 th year
(100.0%)269	(63%)169	(37%)100	Total

Table 2: Number of student by their clinical level and gender.

Juniorclerkship students constituted 39% of total participants. Of the total participants, 65% completed their psychiatry rotation while 45% reported having a relative diagnosed with mental illness and 7% had a personal experience of mental illness as shown in Table 3.

Factors influencing ATP mean score

The mean ATP score of the whole group was 104.20 (SD: 12.02) which indicates a positive attitude toward psychiatry. Nonetheless, as its shown in Table 4, the level of training, gender, exposure to psychiatry training and experience of mental illness either in self or a relative didn't results in statistically significant difference in the score.

Of those with a relative or a friend mental illness, 97.5% agreed that Psychiatry is a respected branch of medicine compared to 90.3% who did not have a relative with mental disorder with p-value of 0.049. Also, 75.4% of students with history of mental illness in relatives or friends believe that Psychiatrists tend to be at least as stable as the average doctor compared to 60.7% of those who did not have (P-value 0.036).

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the attitude of medical students at (SQU) toward psychiatry and identify the influence of age, gender, curriculum, clinical level, exposure to psychiatry training, and experience of mental illness in self or family.

The results of this study showed that most of the students had positive ATP. This result supports the finding of previous studies done in portugal and spain which reported demographic factors to have no influence students' attitude toward psychiatry [14,15].

In the this study, the ATP score were similar among males and females, a finding which differs from what was reported by Al-Adawi et al. [11]. In the current study, completing psychiatry rotation and being at different clinical training levels did not statistically substantiate the propensity of ATP scores. On the other hand, Al-Adawi et al. reported that as students advance in their clinical training, the positivity of their attitude increases. Internationally, many studies reported that psychiatric education resulted in a favorable change in the attitude towards psychiatry [16-19]. However, most of the students believed that Psychiatry increases their understanding of medical and surgical patients. This was also reported by a study done in Pakistan [7]. Also majority of students reported that their psychiatric undergraduate training was valuable.

	Completed psychiatry rotation	Having relative with mental illness	Suffered from mental illness
Yes	151 (65%)	122 (45%)	19 (7%)
No	118 (44%)	147 (55%)	250 (93%)

Table 3: Psychiatry training and exposure to mental illness.

Factor		Mean ATP score	P-Value
Level of training	Pre-clerkship Clerk	103.82	0.923
	Junior-clerkship	104.45	
	7th year	104.39	
Gender	Male	104.79	0.54
	Female	103.86	
Done Psychiatry rotation	Yes	104	0.708
	No	104.64	
Suffered from mental illness	Yes	105.32	0.677
	No	104.12	
Having relative or friend with mental illness	Yes	104.92	0.425
	No	103.79	

Table 4: Factors influencing APT mean score.

According to the current study, the experience of mental illness in relatives or in self did not influence the attitude towards psychiatry scores. This finding is consistent with Al-Adawi et al. [20].

It is worth mentioning that the literature is controversial regarding the exposure to mental illness and attitude toward mental disorders and psychiatry [21].

From a different perspective, this research showed students who had relatives with mental illness, believed that psychiatric hospitals have a specific contribution to make the treatment of the mentally ill more than those who do not have. This finding is in line with a study from Bahrain [9].

The current role of social media in raising awareness about mental health issues and improved psychiatry teaching could in part explain the homogenous positive attitude reported by the study.

Given the above findings, one has always to remember that attitude does not mean action, therefore the question remains whether the endorsed positive attitude by the whole participants will be translated into behaviors and actions.

Conclusion

This study looked at the attitude of medical students towards psychiatry. The overall attitude measured by ATP questionnaire was favorable. However, none of the studied factors seem to result in a statistically countable difference on ATP mean scores. Therefore, those findings add to the valuable controversial literature in the related field. Whether this positive attitude endorsed by medical students will translate into an action or not, will remain an important question to be answered by a qualitative type of research. Nonetheless the results of this study can be harnessed to promote psychiatry as an appealing career in the future.

Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations of this study is that it could not determine

changes in point of view and career choices later in life i.e., it is not longitudinal. The lack of association could be a result of the low power. However, the population participated in this study was comparable to other studies' populations.

The study cannot be generalized because medical student from Oman Medical Collage (OMC) were not included in this study.

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