

ATTITUDE OF MEDICAL STUDENTS TOWARDS PSYCHIATRY IN NWFP

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Background: Worldwide literature shows negative attitude of medical students towards psychiatry, which determines future of this subject. Some work has been conducted in two provinces (Sindh and Punjab) of Pakistan in this regard. The Objective of this cross sectional study was conducted to find out the attitude of medical students in NWFP towards psychiatry. The survey was conducted at two different days of the month of July on final year students of two recognized medical colleges of NWFP. **Method:** The sample consisted of 281 subjects of which 165 (58.3%) were males and 116 (41%) were females. Five Point Attitude scale (ATP 30) was used to assess the attitude. The data collected was labelled and analyzed with the help of SPSS version 10. **Results:** There were total 30 items in the questionnaire of attitude study. Both male and female students showed positive attitude towards most of the items except few, towards which the attitude of the students was neutral. The results seem consistent with the local literature. **Conclusions:** Over all attitudes of medical students was positive. However, attitude of female students towards some of the items were more positive as compared to their male counterparts.

Keywords: Attitude, Survey, NWFP

INTRODUCTION

The increasing demand of psychiatrists and psychiatry oriented physicians and surgeons can not be overlooked because of the following reasons:

1. Global sociopolitical changes have resulted in significant increase in psychiatric morbidity.¹
2. According to W.H.O report psychiatric disorders are now among the top ten causes of economic burden of diseases while depression alone is second in the list.²
3. Concern for management of psychological problems in physically ill patients is increasing.³
4. Literature has shown significant association of psychiatric disorders with physical illness.^{2,4}
5. Liaison psychiatry is emerging as a subspecialty.^{3,4}

Till now the supply of the manpower in psychiatry could not keep pace with the demand. It is because less attraction in psychiatry has been observed all over the world. Different perceptions have been reported to be responsible for this image problem. The most reported reasons are stigma, stress, the attitude of non-psychiatric faculty and assumed higher rate of psychiatric morbidity in psychiatrists.⁵⁻¹⁰

Attitude of an individual determines orientation towards environment. Trend to choose psychiatry as career by doctors and their orientation towards management of psychological problem in physically ill patients as general physicians and surgeons is demand of the present time. Maximum part of attitude building towards subjects takes place in medical training. Therefore, attitude of medical students is of utmost importance. Lot of work has been conducted to know the attitude of medical students throughout the world. Most of the literature shows negative attitude of the students towards psychiatry.^{2,5,11,12} In our country, only a few studies in two provinces with their peculiar socio-cultural context have been conducted. Pakistan consists of four

provinces with almost different socio-cultural background. Therefore; results of these studies cannot be generalized to the whole country. The present study was carried out in the province of NWFP, aimed at to know the attitude of medical students here towards psychiatry.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

It was a cross sectional survey. Final year students of Khyber Medical College Peshawar and Ayub Medical College Abbottabad) of the NWFP were recruited in the study, which are the two most reputed medical colleges of the province. After permission from the principals of respective medical colleges, the author himself distributed the anonymous questionnaire. Convenient sampling technique was used and only those students were included who were present at that time in the lecture hall.

Although the questionnaire used in the study was not a translated version and it was assumed that final year MBBS students would know the language of the questionnaire yet to make the understanding of the questions much easier because of few difficult words, the structure of the questionnaire and common themes of the groups of the questions were explained to them. After that explanation they were asked to write down their first reactions to the questions. The following materials were used:

For evaluation the Attitude Scale (ATP 30) was used; it was designed and validated to measure attitudes of Canadian medical students by Burra.¹³ This Lickerts type scale measures strength of both positive and negative attitudes to various aspects of psychiatry. Respondents express their agreement or disagreement to 30 items in terms of a 5 point scale; Agree, Strongly agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Disagree strongly.

Response for 15 items meant to measure negative attitudes are scored as 1 to 5, whereas, items measuring positive attitudes are scored from 5 to 1 respectively. Total score on the scale indicates positive or negative attitude, with high total score indicating positive and a low score indicating negative attitudes towards different aspects of psychiatry.

SPSS Version 10 was used for data and statistical analysis. Student's *t*-test with $p < 0.05$ was applied for comparison of scores obtained by males and females on each item, to know the statistical significance of the differences.

RESULTS

The sample consisted of 281 subjects of which 165 (58.3%) were male and 116 (41%) were females, approximately equal gender distribution.

Means of scores made on each item in the 4 categories by the subjects as a whole and separately by male and female gender are shown in Tables 1–4.

Although there was obvious arithmetic difference between male and female students in scores on few items shown in the tables, no statistical significance was found at $p < 0.05$ with application of *t*-test.

Table-1: Means of scores on items measuring attitude towards psychiatric patients and illnesses

Items	Sample	Female	Male
Psychiatric patients are human	4.09	4.02	4.17
Psychiatric illnesses need attention	4.44	4.35	4.56
Psychiatric patients are interesting	3.69	3.53	3.92
Interesting to unravel cause	4.27	4.36	4.15

Table-2: Means of scores on items measuring attitude towards psychiatrists and psychiatry

Items	Sample	Male	Female
Psychiatrists talk a lot but do very little	2.97	2.91	3.05
Psychiatrists seem to talk nothing but sex	3.89	3.77	4.07
At times it is hard to think of psychiatrists equal to other doctors	2.85	2.82	2.90
I would like to be a therapist	2.42	2.32	2.57
Psychiatrist tend to be as stable as average doctors	3.32	3.28	3.36
Psychiatrists get less satisfaction from their work than other specialists	2.84	2.78	2.93
If I were asked what I considered to be the three most exciting specialties psychiatry would be excluded	2.93	2.68	3.28
The practice of psychiatry allows the development of really rewarding relationship with people	4.15	4.04	4.34
Psychiatry is unappealing because it makes little use of medical training	3.34	3.16	3.60
On the whole, people taking up psychiatric training are running away from. Participation in real medicine	3.16	3.17	3.14
Psychiatry is a respectable branch of medicine	3.95	3.84	4.10

Table-3: Mean responses of items measuring attitude towards psychiatric knowledge and teaching

Items	Sample	Male	Female
Most of the so-called facts in psychiatry are vague speculation	3.09	3.02	3.17
Psychiatry has very little scientific information to go on	3.16	3.04	3.33
Psychiatry is so unscientific that even the psychiatrists cannot agree to scientific basis	3.21	2.91	3.65
Psychiatric teaching increases our understanding of medical and Surgical patients.	3.66	3.55	3.82
These days psychiatry is the most important part of the curriculum In medical school.	2.80	2.71	2.93
Students who report that their psychiatric undergraduate training has been valuable.	2.64	2.64	2.64
Psychiatry is so amorphous that it cannot be taught effectively	2.91	2.87	2.97

Table-4: Mean responses of items measuring attitude towards psychiatric treatment and hospitals.

Items	Sample	Male	Female
Efficacy of psychotherapy.	3.40	3.35	3.46
Psychotherapy is fraudulent.	3.53	3.51	3.55
With therapy, patients improve	3.72	3.78	3.65
Psychiatric treatment causes patients to worry about symptoms.	2.80	2.86	2.72
Little that psychiatrist can do for their patients.	3.33	3.27	3.41
Psychiatric treatment has become effective.	3.72	3.67	3.78
Psychiatric hospitals little more than prisons	2.65	2.65	2.65
Psychiatric hospitals have specific contribution to make to the treatment of mentally ill	3.67	3.70	3.64

DISCUSSION

Attitude is a hypothetical construct that represents an individual's like or dislike for an item. Attitudes are positive, negative or neutral views of an 'attitude object', i.e., a person, behaviour or event. Attitudes come from judgments and it comprises of affective, behavioural and cognitive component.¹⁴ The present study has explored attitude of medical students towards four major components of psychiatry. These are:

1. Psychiatric patients and psychiatric illness;
2. Psychiatrist and subject of psychiatry;
3. Psychiatric knowledge and teaching;
4. Psychiatric treatment and hospitals;

Table-1 gives the computed mean values of the attitude towards psychiatric patients and psychiatric illnesses. Four items are constructed to measure the attitude in this direction. All of the respondents show positive attitude towards these items and they all agree that psychiatric patients are not only human but they are also interesting. Moreover, psychiatric illnesses require great deal of attention. Another study with somewhat different methodology and questionnaire conducted in

different medical colleges of Karachi in 2003, although has not addressed psychiatric patients and illness as separate domain, yet has given quite a higher percentage of senior as well as junior medical students holding positive view about psychiatry as a whole.¹

It is also note worthy that female respondents are strongly agreed on all items and show more positive attitude as compared to male students. This is similar to the findings of Malhi and Parker that “female expressed a greater interest in psychiatry and were more likely to consider pursuing it as a career, principally due to a greater interest in the subject matter and a stronger desire for interaction with patients”.¹⁵ A study conducted in India in 2001 also supports the same view.¹⁶ Local literature also indicates a study conducted by Minhas et al in 2000, showing broad agreement with the same findings.¹¹

Table-2 consists of eleven items. Respondents show positive attitude towards three items. However it is not discouraging as neutral attitude may be changed and positively whereas they remain neutral towards nine items shaped through proper training and changes in undergraduate curriculum. A study conducted in neighboring country of India in 1988 has also suggested that lack of interest for psychiatry among medical students may be due to insufficient teaching hours, inadequate staff, lack of involvement of senior faculty, absence of provision for examination in the subject, lack of access to audiovisual aids, teaching of psychiatry in mental hospitals and poor planning of curriculum.¹⁷

Table-3 shows neutral responses on 5 items out of 7. As for as item No. 3 is concerned female students disagree with a view considering psychiatry as an un -scientific discipline as compared to their male counterparts who remain neutral. Some of the studies conducted in European countries have revealed the same kind of gender differences.^{18,19} As well as the local literature is concerned, both kinds of gender expressed neutral attitude on that issue.¹¹ whereas the situation in our study is more encouraging.

Table-4 gives the computed mean values of attitudes towards psychiatric treatment and hospitals. The respondents show agreement on four items.^{2,3,6,8} They appreciated the importance of psychiatry and effectiveness of psychiatric treatment. They consider psychiatric hospitals having made specific contribution to the treatment of mental illnesses. However they show neutral responses towards other four items which reflected that they are not clear about the issue in either way.

Many studies have been carried out in the world addressing the attitude of medical students towards psychiatry. However the results of these studies are not

encouraging. But our study as well as the rest of local literature.^{1,11} show over all positive attitude towards most of the aspects of psychiatry. However few studies in our country are conducted in this regard, in particular parts of the country, the results of which can not be generalized. Therefore, it is suggested that a study with larger sample having homogenous properties of subjects from different medical colleges representing all four provinces of the country may be carried out or similar study may be conducted in the rest of the provinces to dig out the over all impression of the country. Moreover, more elaborate and open ended questionnaire may be incorporated to find out different hurdles in positive attitude formation towards different aspects of psychiatry.

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