DH: Ethics and Law

Health sciences students' perception on stigmatization related to COVID-19

Nikoleta Leventi
N Leventi1, E Kazakos2, A Vodenitcharova3, K Popova3, S Velikov1, A Yanakieva1
1HTA, Medical University - Sofia, Sofia, Bulgaria
2Bioethics, Medical University - Sofia, Sofia, Bulgaria
3Social Medicine, Medical University - Sofia, Sofia, Bulgaria
Contact: n.leventi@oz.msu-sofia.bg

Background:
The current COVID-19 pandemic is a challenge for the health sector all over the world. According to WHO, stigma related to COVID-19 can lead to underreporting, increased exposure and low adherence to standard safety precautions thus complicating adequate responses to the pandemic. The purpose of our research was to analyze students’ perceptions on issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic with a special focus on relevant ethical issues. Herein, we present results related to student’s perceptions on stigmatization.

Methods:
A web-based questionnaire was distributed among 715 students; medical students from Medical University - Sofia, Bulgaria and midwifery students from the University of Western Macedonia, Greece. It included 21 questions on socio-demographic characteristics, knowledge on the transmission, symptoms and treatment of COVID-19. The study was conducted between April and July 2020. All the students participated anonymously and voluntarily.

Results:
Data collected show that the main reasons for stigma experience are the presence of cough or flu-like symptoms (67.4%) and travel from high-risk regions (72.6%). These perceptions were significantly higher among medical students (72.5% and 75.7%) compared to other specialties - midwives (59.1%, 67.6%). Asian origin, health professionals as first respondents and release from quarantine were also considered as significant stigma-related factors in about one-third of all participants, respectively.

Conclusions:
Identification of the main public perceptions that may lead to stigmatization and discrimination of patients and vulnerable groups is important in a focused approach to counter its impact on societies. Providing up-to-date education to medical professionals, mitigating the spread of misinformation by real-time monitoring of digital resources, improving public literacy on COVID-19 and establishing a community-level dialogue through digital and social media platforms may raise awareness to reduce stigma.

Key messages:
• Long-term Public health strategies are required to combat misconceptions that perpetuate stigma, in order to achieve better outcomes and improved treatment, and protect mental health.
• As the global COVID-19 health emergency transforms into an unprecedented social crisis, special attention is necessary among vulnerable people to ensure social integrity.