SENIOR MEDICAL STUDENTS’ ATTITUDE TOWARDS PSYCHIATRY: RELATIONSHIP WITH CAREER INTEREST

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SUMMARY

Using the Senior Medical Student Questionnaire, the attitudes towards psychiatry and the career interest in psychiatry of 146 final year medical students were obtained. The results indicated that, on the overall merits of the field of psychiatry and role definition and functioning of psychiatrists, students had a favorable opinion. Many students considered that career and personal rewards in psychiatry are limited. Analysis of the relationship between career interest and attitudes showed that on many items students with a greater career interest in psychiatry had more favorable opinions. However, there was evidence to suggest that students with greater career interest in psychiatry were equally concerned about the low career and social rewards in psychiatry.

INTRODUCTION

Medical students’ attitude towards a specialty are determined by complex interacting variables (Eagle & Marcos, 1980). A variety of factors such as opinions formed in childhood, personality, quality of psychiatric education at medical school, difficulty in working with emotionally disturbed patients, attitude of non-psychiatric faculty, perceived career and social rewards etc. can influence students’ attitude towards psychiatry (Eaton & Marcos, 1980; Bhaskaran, 1988; Bhaskaran, 1990; Buchanan & Bhugra, 1992). These attitudes may be important in determining a career choice of psychiatry (Nielsen & Eaton, 1981).

Low recruitment to psychiatry is a serious challenge and a cause of concern worldwide (Nielsen, 1979; Pardes, 1982; Brook, 1983; Pan et al., 1990). In view of the existing severe shortage of psychiatric manpower (Ministry of Health, 1989), the problem is much more daunting in developing nations like India. Medical students’ attitudes towards psychiatry have been extensively studied in Western Countries (Nielsen & Eaton, 1981; Yager et al., 1982; Wilkinson et al., 1983; Scully et al., 1983), and in India, the importance of psychiatric education for undergraduates is being increasingly recognized (Bhaskaran, 1988; Ponnamma, 1988; Praveenlal, 1988; Bhaskaran, 1990). However, studies about medical students’ attitudes towards psychiatry are relatively few in India (Rao et al., 1989; Prabhakaran et al., 1989; Lal, 1992). Also, to our knowledge, the relationship of the attitudes towards psychiatry and career interest in psychiatry has not been looked into in Indian settings. Hence the aim of the present study was to find out the attitudes of medical students towards psychiatry and the relationship of these attitudes to career interest in psychiatry.

MATERIAL & METHODS

This study was conducted at Kasturba Medical College, Manipal, where the department of psychiatry is situated within the general hospital. The department has 10 faculty members, including clinical psychologists and psychiatric social workers. Final year medical students who had already undergone about 20 hours of theory and 50 hours of clinical posting in psychiatry were the subjects.

The Senior Medical Student Questionnaire developed by A.C. Nielsen (Nielsen & Eaton, 1981) was used to tap information about the attitudes of medical students towards psychiatry and their career interest in psychiatry. This is an 81 item questionnaire which includes both open ended and forced choice Likert-style questions. The questionnaire is divided into coherent sections consisting of background information, career choice, attitudes towards psychiatry and influence of various experiences, psychiatric curriculum and medical school environment on the attitudes. After obtaining prior consent of the college Dean, the nature of the study was explained to all the students present in a theory class, and they were requested to fill the Senior Medical Student Questionnaire. To get the frank opinion of students, students were asked not to enter their name or roll number in their responses, and hence anonymity was guaranteed. None of the students present in the class refused to participate. On an average it took about 25 minutes to complete the questionnaire. For the present study, only the attitude towards psychiatry and their correlation with career interest in psychiatry were analyzed using Kendall’s Tau B as the statistical method. Like the more familiar Pearson product moment correlation coefficient r, Tau can range from +1 to -1. However, Tau is more appropriate than r for correlating ordinal level variables. Statistical analysis was done with the help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS/PC+).

RESULTS

One hundred and forty six students (out of the total batch strength of 157) completed the questionnaire. The students were divided into 3 different groups based on their answers on career interest in psychiatry. Group 1 (n=6) consisted of those students whose current first choice of specialization was psychiatry. Group 2 (n=12) had students who at some point during their undergraduate career have listed psychiatry as one of their top three choices, but whose current first choice is some other specialty, and group 3 (n=128) was made up of the remaining students who did not list psychiatry at any time as any of three choices during their undergraduate career.

The attitude of the final year medical students towards psychiatry are shown in Table 1. About the overall merits of the field of psychiatry and role definition and function of psychiatrists, students generally held a favorable opinion. On questions about possible abuse of legal
Table 1
Attitude towards psychiatry of final year medical students (n=146)

| Questions                                                                 | strongly agree | agree | neutral | disagree | strongly disagree |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| Overall merits of the field of Psychiatry:                                |                |       |         |          |                   |
| Psychiatry has advanced considerably in recent years in the biological   | 29             | 60    | 7       | 2        | 2                 |
| treatment and understanding of schizophrenia and depression.              |                |       |         |          |                   |
| Psychiatry is a rapidly expanding frontier of medicine.                  | 24             | 49    | 18      | 8        | 1                 |
| Psychoanalysis is a powerful method of understanding human behavior.      | 34             | 40    | 14      | 10       | 1                 |
| Psychiatry is unscientific and imprecise.                                | 4              | 3     | 17      | 49       | 27                |
| Psychiatry is attractive as a discipline because it is more intellectually |                |       |         |          |                   |
| comprehensive than other medical careers.                                | 17             | 40    | 34      | 7        | 2                 |
| If someone in my family was very emotionally upset and the situation     | 31             | 38    | 13      | 14       | 4                 |
| didn't seem to be improving I would recommend a psychiatric consultation.  |                |       |         |          |                   |
| Role definition and functioning of psychiatrists:                         |                |       |         |          |                   |
| Entering Psychiatry is waste of medical education.                       | 3              | 0     | 16      | 43       | 38                |
| Today's physician does not have time to deal with patients emotional     |                |       |         |          |                   |
| problems.                                                                | 31             | 44    | 7       | 9        | 9                 |
| With few exceptions, clinical psychologists and social workers are just  |                |       |         |          |                   |
| as qualified as psychiatrists to work with emotionally disturbed persons.  | 4              | 37    | 28      | 23       | 8                 |
| Psychiatrists understand and communicate with people better than the      |                |       |         |          |                   |
| average physician.                                                       | 33             | 37    | 18      | 13       | 1                 |
| Psychiatrists tend to overanalyze human behavior.                        | 10             | 39    | 25      | 25       | 1                 |
| Psychiatrists are fuzzy thinkers.                                         | 4              | 16    | 12      | 45       | 23                |
| Possible abuses and social criticisms:                                   |                |       |         |          |                   |
| Psychiatrists frequently abuse their legal power to hospitalize patients  |                |       |         |          |                   |
| against their will.                                                      | 3              | 9     | 38      | 44       | 7                 |
| Psychiatrists spend too much time seeing patients who don't need their    |                |       |         |          |                   |
| care, while ignoring the problems of those most in need.                  | 3              | 7     | 32      | 51       | 7                 |
| Career and personal rewards:                                             |                |       |         |          |                   |
| On the average, psychiatrists make less money than other physicians.      | 11             | 18    | 30      | 39       | 4                 |
| Within medicine psychiatry has high status.                              | 4              | 19    | 49      | 23       | 4                 |

The attitudes towards psychiatry can be broadly grouped into attitudes about the overall merit of field of psychiatry, role definition and functioning of psychiatrists, possible abuses and social criticism and career and personal rewards. On the overall merits of the field of psychiatry our students had generally favorable opinions. Only 7% of students felt that psychiatry was unscientific and imprecise. 17% of final year students in the study of Prabhakaran et al (1989) and 36% in the study of Rao et al (1989), considered psychiatry as unscientific. These figures from Indian studies are considerably less than the figure of 65% in a study from U.K (Wilkinson et al, 1983). About role definition and functioning of psychiatrists, our results considered psychiatrists as fuzzy thinkers. This is significantly less compared to the findings of the British study which found that the image of psychiatrists as emotionally unstable persisted in the mind of nearly between a third and half of students (Wilkinson et al, 1983). Figures similar to our study in this aspect has been reported by other Indian authors (Rao et al, 1989; Prabhakaran et al, 1989). High percentage of
Table 2
Correlation of attitude towards psychiatry with career interest in psychiatry (n=146)

| Questions                                                                 | Correlation with career interest (Kendall's Tau B) | Significance |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| Overall merits of the field of Psychiatry:                                |                                                     |              |
| Psychiatry has advanced considerably in recent years in the biological treatment and understanding of schizophrenia and depression. | -.05239                                              | .3238        |
| Psychiatry is a rapidly expanding frontier of medicine.                   | .01473                                               | .3507        |
| Psychoanalysis is a powerful method for understanding human behavior.     | .32234                                               | .0017        |
| Psychiatry is unscientific and imprecise.                                 | -.20913                                              | .0296        |
| Psychiatry is attractive as a discipline because it is more intellectually comprehensive than other medical careers. | .18006                                               | .0513        |
| If someone in my family was very emotionally upset and the situation didn't seem to be improving I would recommend a psychiatric consultation. | .26602                                               | .0031        |
| Role definition and functioning of psychiatrists                           |                                                     |              |
| Entering psychiatry is a waste of a medical education.                    | -.28590                                              | .0054        |
| Today's physician does not have time to deal with patients' emotional problems. | .33104                                               | .0013        |
| With few exceptions, clinical psychologists and social workers are just as qualified as psychiatrists to work with emotionally disturbed persons. | .11545                                              | .1460        |
| Psychiatrists understand and communicate with people better than the average physician. | .03216                                              | .3844        |
| Psychiatrists tend to overanalyze human behavior.                         | -.18510                                              | .0490        |
| Psychiatrists are fuzzy thinkers.                                         | -.10033                                              | .1806        |
| Possible abuses and social criticisms                                      |                                                     |              |
| Psychiatrists frequently abuse their legal power to hospitalize patients against their will. | -.08146                                              | .2336        |
| Psychiatrists spend too much time seeing patients who don't need care, while ignoring the problems of those most in need. | .14147                                              | .1013        |
| On the average, psychiatrists make less money than other physicians.      | .22782                                               | .0176        |
| Within medicine psychiatry has high status.                              | .06943                                               | .2105        |

Neutral answers on questions about possible legal abuse by psychiatry are not well cared for during the curriculum. Only 23% of our students opined that psychiatry has high status within medicine and a figure of 32% in this aspect has been reported by Prabhakaran et al. (1989). However, Nielson and Eaton (1981) reported that only 4% of their students thought that psychiatry has high status within medicine.

Correlation of the attitudes and career interest in psychiatry revealed interesting findings. Significantly more students with greater career interest in psychiatry considered that emotional problems of patients were not dealt with adequately by physicians; they also considered psychiatry as a scientific and intellectually comprehensive subject. These results indicate that the perception of overall merits of psychiatry might differ based on students' career interest. However, our finding that there was no significant association between career interest and the students' agreement/disagreement with the statement "Within medicine psychiatry has high status" shows that those students who were planning a career in psychiatry also perceived psychiatry as low in status compared to other medical specialties. Interestingly, those students with a greater career interest in psychiatry considered that psychiatrists make less money than other physicians. These facts and the evidence that students expressing interest in psychiatry are considered as odd or neurotic by other faculty (Nielson & Eaton 1981; Prabhakaran et al., 1989; Alexander et al., unpublished) can be a serious emotional challenge to students opting for psychiatry and may dissuade many from entering psychiatry.

Before drawing conclusions about the relationship of attitudes towards psychiatry and career interest from this study a significant methodological problem should be considered. The number of students classified as having positive career interest in psychiatry was only 18, whereas the group considered as having low career interest had 128 students. Because of low recruitment to psychiatry similar methodological problems were faced by other studies (Nielson and Eaton, 1981).

In conclusion, our sample of medical students had generally favorable attitudes about the field of psychiatry and psychiatrists. There was a trend towards a more favorable attitude in our study as compared to Western studies. However, there is general pessimism about career rewards in psychiatry. In fact, many students in open ended questions commented about the low career rewards and social prestige of psychiatry especially in developing nations which turns them off from psychiatry. Further studies about the factors influencing the attitudes towards psychiatry and recruitment to psychiatry are warranted.
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