IMPACT OF MEDICAL SCHOOL EXPERIENCES ON SENIOR MEDICAL STUDENTS’ INTEREST IN PSYCHIATRY.

P. JOHN ALEXANDER, N. KUMARASWAMY

This is a questionnaire study analyzing the influence of various medical school experiences on 146 final year medical students' interest and respect for psychiatry. The results indicated that clinical postings, lectures, contact with psychiatric patients and psychiatry faculty had a positive influence on the majority of students. Many students perceived non-psychiatric faculty and fellow students as critical of psychiatry. Students with greater career interest in psychiatry were more positively influenced by contact with patients, faculty and clinical postings. When compared to results reported from developed nations, medical school experiences had a similar influence on our students. However, it is doubtful whether our findings can be generalized to other medical schools in India and further studies form other medical schools are warranted.

Key words: medical students, attitudes, psychiatry.

INTRODUCTION

Low recruitment to psychiatry is perhaps a world-wide phenomenon (Nielsen, 1979; Brook, 1983; Pan et al, 1990). However, due to the existing severe shortage of manpower in psychiatry (NMHP, 1989), the problem is much more daunting in developing nations like India. A variety of factors such as opinions formed in childhood, personality, quality of psychiatric education at medical school, attitude of non-psychiatric faculty, career and social rewards influence medical students' attitude, interest and respect for psychiatry (Eagle & Marcos, 1980; Buchanan & Bhugra, 1992). Understanding the factors influencing students' interest and respect for psychiatry is essential because of its obvious relevance to recruitment to psychiatry.

Of the factors influencing students interest in psychiatry, medical school (institutional) factors may be amenable to corrective measures (Pardes, 1982; Zimny & Sata, 1986). In India, 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, poor planning of curriculum (Bhaskaran, 1988 & 1990).

Medical students' attitude towards psychiatry have been studied in Indian medical schools (Prabhakaran et al, 1989; Rao et al, 1989), but, there has been a lack of systematic studies of the influence of various medical school factors on students' interest and respect for psychiatry.

The aim of the present study was to examine these influences and to find out whether the influences differ based on students career interest in psychiatry.

METHOD

This study was conducted at Kasturba Medical College, Manipal, where the department of psychiatry is situated within a general hospital. Apart from providing psychiatric care, the department conducts postgraduate courses in psychiatry and is also involved in undergraduate teaching. Senior medical students who were shortly going to appear for their final examination were the subjects. These students had undergone about fifty hours in psychiatry about a year prior to the study and had finished twenty hours of theory classes on psychiatry.

The influence of various medical school experiences on students interest and respect for psychiatry were assessed using the senior medical students questionnaire developed by Nielsen (1981). During a theory class, all the students present were explained the nature of the study and were requested to complete the questionnaire. To get a frank opinion, anonymity was guaranteed and students were asked not to fill in their name of roll number in their responses. None of the students refused to participate. In this paper the influences of medical school experiences and students views on the medical school environment are reported. Students' attitude towards psychiatry were reported in a separate paper (Alexander & Kumaraswamy, 1993).

Statistical analyses were done with the help of statistical package for social sciences (SPSS/PC),
The degree of association between students' career interest and their responses to questions about medical school experiences and medical school environment were analyzed using Kendall's Tau B.

RESULTS

The questionnaire was completed by 146 students (out of the total batch strength of 157). Students were grouped into three different categories based on their career interest in psychiatry. Group 1 consisted of those students currently planning to choose psychiatry as their future career; group 2: students who at some point during their undergraduate career had considered psychiatry as one of their top three choices but whose current first choice is some other specialty, and group 3: students who never considered psychiatry as a career choice during their undergraduate career. There were 6, 12 and 128 students in groups 1, 2 and 3 respectively.

The impact of medical school experiences on students' interest and respect for psychiatry and the degree of association of these responses with career interest in psychiatry are shown in Table 1. Clinical postings, contact with psychiatric faculty and contact with psychiatric patients had a positive influence on 67%, 56% and 62% of students respectively. The views of students on their medical school environment and the degree of association of these responses with career interest in psychiatry are shown in Table 2. About one third (36%) of students perceived that non-psychiatry faculty were critical of psychiatry and 44% agreed with the proposition that students showing interest in psychiatry are often at risk of being seen by others as odd or neurotic. More than a third of students felt that faculty and fellow students try to dissuade interested students from opting for psychiatry as a career.

DISCUSSION

The response rate of 93% is quite high and hence the responses can be considered as representative of the whole batch. Also, anonymity about the identity of the responses should have elicited more frank opinions. However, before drawing conclusions about the differential effects of medical school experiences based on students' career interest, one major methodological problem should be considered. The students with a positive career interest in psychiatry were 18 whereas those without a career interest in psychiatry were 128. Because of low recruitment to psychiatry similar methodological problem is inherent in studies of this nature.

In our study, 3.9% of senior medical students considered psychiatry as their first choice for future specialization. This is comparable to the figure of around 4% reported in other studies (Nielsen, 1979; Brook, 1983; Rao et al., 1989). Our findings show that clinical postings, lectures, contact with psychiatric

Table 1

| Experience                                      | Percentage of students | Correlation with career interest Kendall's Tau B |
|------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
|                                                 | Very much increased    | Some what increased | No change | Some what decreased | Very much decreased |                                                 |
| 1. Psychiatric clinical posting                 | 35                     | 32                 | 20        | 9                   | 4                   | 0.21*                                          |
| 2. Contact with faculty psychiatrists           | 25                     | 31                 | 30        | 12                  | 2                   | 0.32#                                          |
| 3. Psychiatric lectures                         | 24                     | 39                 | 31        | 3                   | 3                   | 0.14                                           |
| 4. Contact with psychiatric patients           | 34                     | 28                 | 25        | 3                   | 10                  | 0.19*                                          |
| 5. Non-psychiatry faculty's opinions about psychiatry | 7                      | 11                 | 54        | 22                  | 6                   | 0.12                                           |
| 6. Fellow students opinions about psychiatry    | 10                     | 10                 | 57        | 18                  | 5                   | 0.01                                           |

*p < 0.05;  # p < 0.005
MEDICAL SCHOOL EXPERIENCES AND INTEREST IN PSYCHIATRY

Table 2
Students’ views on their medical school environment (n=146)

| Proposition                                                                 | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Correlation with career interest in psychiatry (Kendall’s Tau B) |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Most non-psychiatry faculty at my medical school are critical of psychiatry. | 6              | 30    | 46      | 12       | 6                 | 0.11                                                            |
| 2. Most non-psychiatry faculty are concerned about the interpersonal and psychological care of patients. | 3              | 28    | 35      | 34       | 0                 | -0.006                                                         |
| 3. Psychiatric consultation for medical and surgical patients are only rarely helpful. | 0              | 13    | 16      | 67       | 4                 | -0.08                                                          |
| 4. If a student is interested in psychiatry, as a career, other students and faculty will try to dissuade him or her. | 7              | 28    | 25      | 31       | 9                 | 0.06                                                           |
| 5. Psychiatric courses are too easy they should be more demanding and on a par with the difficulty of other course. | 6              | 9     | 28      | 42       | 16                | 0.18*                                                          |
| 6. If a student expresses interest in psychiatry, he or she risks being associated with a group of psychiatrists who are often seen as odd, peculiar or neurotic. | 16             | 28    | 23      | 31       | 3                 | 0.11                                                           |
| 7. The faculty in my school usually deals explicitly and helpfully with students emotional and intellectual concerns. | 7              | 35    | 23      | 22       | 6                 | 0.11                                                           |
| 8. The emotional and personal needs of house staff are considered important by the faculty. | 4              | 33    | 29      | 29       | 4                 | 0.19*                                                          |

*p < 0.05

patients and faculty psychiatrists had a positive impact on the majority of students. Positive influence of these factors on around half of the students and negative influence on around one third of students was reported by Nielsen and Eaton (1981) from U.S.A. Those students with a greater career interest in psychiatry were more favorably influenced by clinical postings and contact with patients and faculty. Our finding that contact with psychiatry faculty increased students’ interest in psychiatry in 56% of students is in contrast with the generally unflattering remarks about psychiatrists reported by students in some studies (Nielsen & Eaton, 1981; Wilkinson et al, 1983).

It is heartening to note that non-psychiatry faculty’s and fellow students’ opinion about psychiatry had a negative impact on only about a quarter of students. However, criticism of psychiatry and dissuading interested students from opting for psychiatry as a career by other faculty and fellow students were not uncommon. Compared with studies form developed nations, our results indicate that overall our students were similarly influenced (and on some factors more favorably and less nega-
However, before generalizing from our study that medical school experiences have a similar influence on students in developing nations like India and developed nations, some caveats should be considered. Our department with ten faculty members including clinical psychologists, psychiatric social workers and active involvement of all faculty members, with intensive planning of curriculum and use of audiovisual aids in teaching may not be representative of an average psychiatry department in India.

In many medical colleges in India, psychiatry departments are inadequately staffed and often have only one or two psychiatrists (Bhaskaran, 1988). Faculty teaching undergraduates are relatively young and are poorly trained in teaching methodology, curriculum planning and use of audiovisual teaching aids (Bhaskaran, 1990). An alternate explanation for higher career interest and more favorable response shown by our students is that many of them were planning to pursue a career in U.S.A or U.K. In fact, many students in open ended questions commented about the low career reward and low social status of psychiatry in developing nations like India as compared to Western countries.

There is a need to search systematically whether the low recruitment and interest in psychiatry in developing nations is primarily due to perceived low social and career rewards in psychiatry rather than to poor planning and teaching of psychiatry in undergraduate curriculum. Further studies in this regard from different settings are essential. Remedial measures for medical school factors having negative influence and ways of maximizing gains from positive influences should be urgently looked into.

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P. John Alexander MD, Reader; N. Kumaraswamy PhD, Reader, Department of Psychiatry, Kasturba Medical College, Manipal 576 119, Karnataka.