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Original research article:

**ATTITUDE OF HEALTHCARE WORKERS TOWARDS
PSYCHIATRY: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY.**

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: Attitude of healthcare workers i.e., Specialist doctors, Resident doctors and Interns towards psychiatry is important in shaping the attitude of medical students, as well as the common public that they interact with on a day-to-day basis, towards psychiatry. The data available currently in this context is limited.

AIMS: The aim of the study is to assess and compare the attitude of healthcare workers (Specialists, Residents and Interns) towards psychiatry in a tertiary care hospital.

METHODS: 150 healthcare workers including 44 interns, 70 Residents and 36 specialists of Medical/Surgical/Non-clinical field fulfilling the inclusion criteria were evaluated by Attitude towards Psychiatry scale (ATP-30). Independent t-test and other tests were used for statistical analysis.

RESULTS: Mean ATP score came out to be 99.6. Female gender (101.01), having a family member with psychiatric illness (102.81) & medical specialty (100.28) were associated with higher ATP scores. 80% of the participants reported that psychiatric illnesses are as important as physical illnesses and 73% felt that psychiatric interventions in recent times are effective. Average ATP score of interns (101.90) was more than that of residents (98.98) and specialist doctors (97.97).

CONCLUSIONS: With changing times, the view towards psychiatric illnesses and psychiatry as a whole has been gradually improving. The COVID pandemic has shown us importance of mental health. A positive attitude towards psychiatry among healthcare workers will aid in decreasing the stigma towards psychiatry among general population.

KEYWORDS: Attitude, Healthcare Workers, Psychiatry

INTRODUCTION

According to WHO, health is defined as a “state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely an absence of disease or infirmity” and currently the definition also includes the ability to lead a “socially and economically productive life [1]”. We often tend to disregard the word “mental” in this definition as mental health has not been considered to be as important as physical health for a very long time now. However, it is

an undeniable fact that mental health issues are on a rise in our country as the numbers show: By 2017, one in seven Indians were affected by mental disorders, 197 million Indians were suffering from mental disorders of whom 46 million had depression and 45 million anxiety disorders while also accounting for 36.6% of suicides globally.

[2]. While the mental health crisis continues to worsen in our country, there is still a great shortage of psychiatrists. As per a 2019 article published in the Indian Journal of Psychiatry, the number of Psychiatrists is 0.75 per 100000 population, while the desirable number for the same is more than 3 psychiatrists per 100000 population.

[3]. For a very long time now, medical students and interns have had a negative perception towards psychiatry as a career choice even though the tolerance towards psychiatric illness and patients has improved over the period of time.

[4, 5]. The reason for the same might be poor inclusion of psychiatry in undergraduate medical curriculum resulting in poor awareness/poor understanding of psychiatric illnesses and lack of contact and familiarity with individuals with psychiatric disorders.

[6]. Negative portrayal of psychiatry in mass media, films, various books and newspapers also plays important role in formation of opinion towards psychiatry and psychiatric illnesses. In a previous study, it was found that majority of postgraduates did not find their psychiatric undergraduate training to be valuable and doubted the efficacy of psychotherapy.

[7]. Teaching medical specialists often have a prejudiced view towards psychiatry and their negative comments (“bad mouthing”) has a damaging effect on attitude of junior doctors towards psychiatry as a whole.

[8]. In a recent study, the attitude of teaching medical specialists in a tertiary care hospital in India was found to be overall negative, which would negatively influence the junior doctors that they teach.

[9]. There is a need to understand the attitude of doctors and other healthcare workers toward psychiatry in different parts of India. Few studies have been conducted in our country in this context up until now. We designed the present study to assess ATP of interns, resident doctors and teaching medical specialists in a tertiary care hospital and determine a correlation, if any. We also analyzed the influence of demographic variables, specialization, and personal & family history of psychiatric illness on the attitudes toward psychiatry.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study performed was cross-sectional. A total of 150 healthcare workers including 70 resident doctors, 36 specialist doctors and 44 intern doctors, aged between 18 to 70 years, working at a tertiary care hospital in Ahmadabad city were included in the study after obtaining their informed consent. A semi structured proforma consisting of demographic details was filled up by the participants.

Following that, the participants’ attitude towards psychiatry was assessed by using Attitude towards psychiatry (ATP-30) scale [10]. It is a 30-item self-administered scale validated for assessing attitude towards psychiatry. ATP-30 scale has good psychometric properties with split half reliability 0.9 and test-retest reliability of 0.87. It has 8 different non overlapping domains: psychiatric patients, psychiatric illness, psychiatric treatment, psychiatric knowledge, psychiatrists, psychiatric career choice, psychiatric institution, and psychiatric teaching. Responses to each item rated on a 5-point liker scale ranging from 1-5. The minimum score on this scale is 30 while the maximum score is 150 [10].

All the data collected was entered into an excel sheet and a master chart was prepared. The variables were then compared using independent t-test, analysis of variance (ANOVA) and fisher’s exact test.

RESULTS

The ATP-30 questionnaire was given to 150 consenting healthcare workers including 70 resident doctors, 36 specialist doctors and 44 intern doctors after obtaining their informed consent. 73 (48.66%) respondents were male while 77 (51.33%) were female. Majority of the respondents (80.66%) respondents were less than 30 years old indicating more of young population. Majority of the resident doctors and specialist doctors were clinicians, that is, of medical or surgical branch while interns constituted of 29.33% of study population. 14.66% of the respondents have family history of psychiatric illness while 7.33% of the respondents have personal history of psychiatric illness

The mean score of ATP questionnaire is 99.6 with range from 69-133 and standard deviation is 12.975, which indicates an overall positive attitude towards psychiatry. Female gender, specialization in a clinical discipline and family history of psychiatric illness are associated with a relatively higher score. We used independent t-test to compare mean ATP-30 scores in two-group comparisons like gender, age, personal and family history of psychiatric illness ANOVA (analysis of variance) for comparison of specialisation (medical, surgical and non-clinical)

While different values were obtained in the above comparisons, they were not statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), that is, no significant association could be found as seen in table 1.

TABLE 1: Demographic profile and mean attitude toward psychiatry scores in different subgroups using independent t-test and ANOVA

SUBGROUP	n (%)	MEAN ATP SCORE	STANDARD DEVIATION	P value
GENDER				
➤ Male	73 (48.66)	98.109	13.738	0.1702
➤ Female	77 (51.33)	101.012	12.039	
AGE				
➤ <30 years	121 (80.66)	99.719	12.257	0.818
➤ >30 years	29 (19.33)	99.103	15.610	
DESIGNATION				
• RESIDENT				0.276
➤ Medical	40 (26.66)	99.85	9.419	
➤ Surgical	24 (16)	99.375	14.415	
➤ Non-clinical	06 (04)	91.666	9.410	
• SPECIALIST DOCTOR				0.434
➤ Medical	13 (08.66)	101.615	14.819	
➤ Surgical	12 (08)	98.166	15.946	
➤ Non-clinical	11 (07.33)	93.454	12.666	
• INTERN	44 (29.33)	101.909	12.975	----
PERSONAL H/O PSYCHIATRIC ILLNESS				
➤ Yes	11 (7.33)	102.272	14.161	0.478
➤ No	139 (92.66)	99.388	12.853	
FAMILY H/O PSYCHIATRIC ILLNESS				
➤ Yes	22 (14.66)	102.818	14.253	0.207
➤ No	128 (85.33)	99.046	12.661	

Fisher's exact test is used to evaluate the association of demographic variables, specialization and family history of psychiatric illness with three categories of ATP score (positive, neutral and negative). No significant association was found as seen in table 2.

TABLE 2: Association of demographic variables and specialization with total attitude toward psychiatry scores using Fisher's exact test

VARIABLES	POSITIVE (>90)	NEUTRAL (=90)	NEGATIVE (<90)	P value
Gender				
• Male	49	02	22	0.158
• Female	60	00	17	
Age				
• <30	87	01	30	0.483
• >30	22	01	09	
Personal H/O psychiatric illness				
• Yes	10	00	01	0.389
• No	99	02	38	
Family H/O psychiatric illness				
• Yes	19	00	03	0.412
• no	90	02	36	
Specialisation				
• Medical	42	00	11	0.241
• Surgical	25	01	10	
• Non-clinical	10	00	07	

75% of the respondents feel that psychiatry is a respected branch of medicine. Majority of the respondents (85%) of the respondents believes that psychiatric illnesses are as important as physical illness. Also, 8 out of 10 respondents believed that psychiatric patients should not be stigmatized and that admission to a psychiatric hospital, when required, helps in improvement of these patients [Table 3].

TABLE 3: Most favourable responses of attitude towards psychiatry questionnaire

QUESTION NUMBER	QUESTION	RESPONSE	FREQUENCY %
11	Psychiatry is a respected branch of medicine	Agree/strongly agree: 113 Neutral: 28 Disagree/strongly disagree: 9	75.33 18.66 6
12	Psychiatric illness deserves at least as much attention as physical illness	Agree/strongly agree: 127 Neutral: 23 Disagree/strongly disagree: 0	84.66 15.33 0
20	Psychiatric hospitals have a specific contribution to make to the treatment of the mentally ill.	Agree/strongly agree: 115 Neutral: 33 Disagree/strongly disagree: 2	76.66 22 1.33
27	If we listen to them, psychiatric patients are just as human as other people.	Agree/strongly agree: 117 Neutral: 26 Disagree/strongly disagree: 7	78 17.33 4.66

Only about 35% respondents reported that they would consider psychiatry as a career. A similar number of respondents (36%) considered psychiatry to be an exciting specialty. 2/3rd of the respondents had either neutral or negative feeling that psychiatric treatment increases the worries of patient. More than 2/3rd respondents felt that it is difficult to teach psychiatry as it lacks a definite structure for teaching [Table 4].

TABLE 4: Least favourable responses of attitude towards psychiatry questionnaire

QUESTION NUMBER	QUESTION	RESPONSE	FREQUENCY %
16	Psychiatric treatment causes patients to worry too much about their symptoms.	Disagree/strongly disagree: 54 Neutral: 50 Agree/strongly agree: 46	36 33.33 30.66
21	If I were asked what I considered to be the three most exciting medical specialties, psychiatry would be excluded.	Disagree/strongly disagree: 54 Neutral: 46 Agree/strongly agree: 50	36 30.66 33.33
30	Psychiatry is so amorphous that it cannot really be taught effectively.	Disagree/strongly disagree: 47 Neutral: 63 Agree/strongly agree: 40	31.33 42 26.66

DISCUSSION

The attitude of interns, residents and teaching specialist doctors turned out to be positive overall as evidenced by the mean ATP score of 99.6. The attitude towards psychiatric patients and psychiatric illness was more favourable than that of psychiatry as a career choice.

PREVIOUS STUDIES:

Various studies have been conducted in the past to assess the attitude of medical students (undergraduates) towards psychiatry, most of them showing overall negative attitude towards psychiatry [11, 12]. Lack of awareness, limited exposure to psychiatric patients and poor inclusion of psychiatry in undergraduate medical curriculum are the primary causes for their negative attitudes. In the study conducted by Parikh *et al* [5] and Patra *et al* [9] among the interns and teaching medical specialists respectively, their attitude towards psychiatry was found to be negative overall. However, in a study conducted by Desai *et al.*, regular attendance in clinical posting in psychiatry department resulted in a significant improvement of ATP scores towards the end of term as compared to the beginning [13]. Few numbers of studies have been conducted in our country where intern doctors, resident doctors and specialist doctors all were included and assessed for their attitude towards psychiatry thus justifying the population that was chosen for our study. Our study has shown a positive shift in attitude towards psychiatry as compared to studies of the past. One of the reasons for this change is inclusion of psychiatry in undergraduate medical curriculum in the form of lectures and clinical psychiatric postings. Internship in the department of psychiatry has improved the understanding of psychiatric illness among medical students while debunking myths and misconceptions. Personal history and family history of psychiatric illness have significant contribution in this aspect as almost of 90% of participants who had personal or family history of psychiatric illness have positive attitude towards psychiatry as they themselves have witnessed the efficacy of psychiatric treatment. During the postgraduate training, exposure to psychiatric patients and psychiatric co-morbidities in medical or surgical patient and their successful treatment contributes to a positive attitude towards psychiatry.

In the recent years, there is increase in awareness of psychiatric illnesses and acceptance of psychiatric patients as a result of widespread campaigning by government, doctors as well as prominent individuals. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic brought with it isolation, quarantines, lockdowns and the fear of the disease itself, which resulted in increased psychiatric problems which were tackled by mental health helplines, teleconsultation and the use of social media to facilitate resolution of these problems. As a result, importance of mental health further increased and there was a positive outcome on attitude towards psychiatry as a whole.

Various steps still need to be taken to further improve image and understanding of psychiatry. Replacement of didactic lectures with patient-oriented teaching, wherein there is more opportunity for patient interaction, can improve student's ATP [14]. Elective placements in psychiatry during medical graduation can provide better opportunities for engaging with and understanding patients with psychiatric illness. During internship, inclusion of interns in history taking, diagnosis and management of patients in outpatient and inpatient settings can help decrease the stigma and improve the image of psychiatry.

LIMITATIONS

Our study is cross-sectional, whereas a follow up study would show the level of variation over time. This study has been conducted in a small population; hence larger sample studies are required for the results to be generalized.

CONCLUSIONS

The attitude of healthcare workers i.e. doctors and interns towards psychiatric illnesses, treatment and patients has improved gradually due to various reasons like inclusion of psychiatry in undergraduate studies, better understanding of psychiatric issues, increase in acceptance of patients with psychiatric illness, widespread awareness campaigns by the government, psychiatrists and various individual personalities as well. However, the attitude of our doctors towards psychiatrists as professionals and psychiatry as a career choice is less favourable resulting in significant dearth of psychiatrists across the country. Improving the image and understanding of psychiatry by its inclusion at various levels of medical education can improve the recruitment of medical students into the speciality of psychiatry and that in turn would improve quality of clinical care received by patients of psychiatric illness.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest.

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