

Original Research Articles

Public's Attitude Towards Psychiatry in an Egyptian Population

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Summary

Numerous studies conducted during the last decades indicate that public's attitude towards the mentally ill is strongly prejudiced. Since the attitude of the public also has an effect on community - based psychiatric care, we examined the attitude of a sample of Egyptian population towards psychiatry. Participants included 500 individuals in different occupations; doctors, nurses, dentists, pharmacists, people working in the media and lay people. They were living in Shebeen El-Kom & Tanta, which are two big cities in Egypt. Ages ranged between 18-60 years. They were asked to fill out a questionnaire sheet that is formed of 44 questions related to the attitude towards mental illness, its causes & different methods used in treatment. Results showed that the majority (53.2%) of the sample had negative attitude towards mental illness. Elderly people showed more negative attitude. However, the highly educated (54.4%) showed more positive attitude, 33.2% of them believed that mental illness is due to demoniacal possession by ancestral spirits. Doctors don't have better attitude towards the mentally ill; they have an even more negative attitude towards the mental illness than the general population. Pharmacists considered mental illness a stigma and they are shameful to inform other people about the illness of a psychiatric patient in the family. The present study revealed that the studied sample of people in different levels of education, occupation and age accept visiting traditional healers before consulting a psychiatrist. Lay people, people working in media, pharmacists and nurses believe that ECT causes permanent memory impairment.

Introduction

Indeed individual values and personal beliefs affect the attitude towards mental illness, mentally ill patients and various methods used in treatment of mental disorders. Mental illness was viewed as spiritual condemnation, demoniacal possession by ancestral spirits as a result of neglecting a taboo or neglecting rituals (Freedman et al, 1991). In the nineteenth century, mental illness was viewed as incurable and little, if any, human treatment existed (Kalinowsky et al, 1991). Beginning in 1950, pharmacotherapy changed the picture of mental health care. Neuroleptics and later antidepressants brought new hope to treating mental illness particularly psychosis (Johnson, 1993 & Baily 1995). Traditional healers play a major role in the primary health care in Egypt. Some of such healers, particularly religious ones, play a positive role and a quite number of psychiatrists are not antiempathetic of this type of healing (Okasha, 1988). Several studies were conducted to assess the attitude of the public towards mental illness. In a study done to assess the attitude of psychiatric doctors and nurses towards the mentally ill, psychiatric doctors were found to have a more liberal and positive attitude towards the mentally ill than psychiatric nurses (Sevigny et al; 1999).

Another study examined the attitude of professional nurses towards nursing mentally ill patients in a tertiary hospital in Durban, and showed that the attitude towards nursing mentally ill patient was negative and affected the intellectual and the affective components of the nurses' psychological functioning (Mavundla, 2000). Eighty movies that describe the representation of mental patients were studied in different countries. Mental patients were viewed as victims of the family and society and the psychiatric hospitals are never shown as therapeutic but only used for keeping away and bringing back the stray sheep to the social field (Veyrat, 1994).

So cultural and religious beliefs influence perceptions of mental illness and any clinician interested in treating mentally ill people and their families must consider these beliefs so that he or she can develop culturally specific interventions. This study was designed to assess the attitude of a sector of the Egyptian population who are always in contact with patients in their daily work and may participate in formation of their concepts. This includes doctors, nurses, dentists and pharmacists.