

Rate of Depression in First-Year Medical Students

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Background: Medical students have higher rates of depression than general population as shown by several international studies. This study aimed at investigating the rate of depression in first-year medical students before and after being exposed to medical school stress.

Subjects & Methods: Two-stage cross-sectional design based on self-reported

questionnaire including a standardized measure of depressive symptoms (BDI).

Results: After 12 weeks of medical school stress, rate of moderate depression increased from 15.6% to 22.8% and of severe depression from 1.5% to 6.5%.

Conclusion: in the traditional curriculum medical school study the rates of depression increased significantly during the first year.

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Abbreviations:

BDI: Beck Depressive Inventory.

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INTRODUCTION

Psychiatric illnesses in medical students interfere with their successful completion of medical education and with the practice of medicine.

Medical school is recognized as a stressful environment that often exerts a negative effect on the academic performance, physical health, and psychological well-being of the students (Mosley, et al. 1994).

Mental illnesses in medical students and physicians have been reviewed in the literature (Vaillant, et al. 1972) which suggests that problems frequently originate in medical school and may become recognizable in that phase of their life.

The pervasive nature of stress in medical school and the importance of learning to cope with stress are discussed widely in the medical literature. Sources of stress in medical students are many. Stress associated with trying to learn a massive amount of information in a limited time, the difficulty of material to be learned and the stress of competition.

Several international studies showed that medical students have higher rates of depression than general population (Epstein, et al. 1973; Clark and Zeldow, 1988; Zoccolillo, et al. 1986; Rosal, et al. 1997 and Vitaliano, et al. 1988). Students enter medical school with their lowest rates of depression and peak in depressive symptoms during first and second year of school, the transition from basic science to preclinical

training (Clark and Zeldow, 1988). This period is associated with an increase in stress.

The recognition and prevention of psychiatric illness among medical students and subsequently among physicians could begin before or during medical school. The evaluation of problems in medical students has been approached in several ways. Some studies have focused on the frequency of symptoms in the total medical student population compared to control groups such as the general population (Lloyd and Gartrell, 1984), or other graduate students (Bjorksten, et al. 1983). Another approach has been to evaluate the rate at which medical students seek psychiatric care; figures of 2% to 20% of the medical student population have been reported (Salmons, 1983).

From the clinical experience at College of Medicine, King Saud University, Riyadh City, Saudi Arabia, the researchers have noticed that the number of medical students suffering from psychiatric illness particularly depression is increasing. However, little is known about the rate of depression in medical students at King Saud University. This study seeks to investigate the rate of depression in first-year medical students at King Saud University where the traditional curriculum is being followed.

METHOD

A two-stage cross-sectional study was conducted among male and female first-year medical students in