

How to Cite:

Kumar, B. G. H., Kumar, A., & Keertish, N. (2022). Perceived awareness about mental illness among journalism students and medical students: A comparative study from urban India. *International Journal of Health Sciences*, 6(S1), 10080–10088. <https://doi.org/10.53730/ijhs.v6nS1.7389>

Perceived awareness about mental illness among journalism students and medical students: A comparative study from urban India

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Abstract---Aim: The study was planned to assess the perceived level of awareness about mental illness among the Journalism students and the Medical students. Materials and methods: A total of 210 students were surveyed, 70 in each group to know their perception of awareness about mental illness. The questionnaire consisted of questions regarding contact with psychiatrist during their lifetime for self, family and friends, about exposure to psychiatry/psychology as one of the subjects during their course. They were also asked about the perceived cause of mental illness and source of information regarding mental illness from a list of choices. Results: Only 9 out of 210 respondents stated that they have a family history of mental illness, however, almost 31 respondents stated that they have come in contact with a psychiatrist in their lifetime with regard to consultation for self, family or friend. Among the JPG students, 59.5% felt that the portrayal in the movies was in negative light. Regarding the portrayal of mental illness in media, majority of journalism students believed that it was portrayed positively (JUG-97.2% and JPG-81.1%). In contrast, only 62.5% of the medical students believed that mental illness is portrayed positively in media. 94% and 88% of JUG and JPG students believed that they were confident in reporting mental issues. Conclusion: The need of the hour is to sensitize journalism students and the media about these issues either through proactive outreach or policy decisions in order to improve the overall awareness levels of the community.

Keywords---Journalism students, mental illness, medical students.

Introduction

Mental illness causes morbidity that affects more than a quarter of all health loss. The morbidity caused by the mental illness is 8 times and 20 times more than the morbidity caused by coronary heart disease and cancer respectively [1]. As such, life expectancy is steadily increasing all over the world due to better medical care and awareness among the public for diseases other than mental illness. However, the morbidity of mental illness is increasing over the years, which is negatively impacting the quality of life [2].

Around 26.2% of Americans per year suffer from one or the other psychiatric disorders and prevalence rates are similar in Europe as well [3]. Point prevalence of psychiatric disorders in general population in India is around 0.95%-13% [4]. The awareness about mental disorders has been found to be better in young people with high socioeconomic status and higher level of education [5]. However, in India due to the stigma associated with mental illness, the proportion of patients seeking professional help is lesser compared to the western countries. There is dissociation between the beliefs held by the general public regarding mental illnesses and the effectiveness of treatment provided by the healthcare professionals [6].

Two important issues related to mental health can be attributed to media and its influence on the general population. Firstly, media can play a crucial role in increasing or decreasing stigma. Media coverage on mental illness and violence related issues can contribute to stigma.[7] Even depiction of psychiatrists in positive or negative light can influence help-seeking behaviour of the patients suffering from mental illness.[8,9,10] Secondly, media can influence suicidal behaviour and therefore, depiction of fictional and real suicides need to be carried out in a careful manner. [11,12]

The awareness among the Journalism students regarding mental illness is important because we can expect the same to percolate down to the public through print or other forms of media. In this background, the study was planned to assess the perceived level of awareness about mental illness among the Journalism students and the Medical students.

Materials and Methods

This study was carried out in the department of Psychiatry, Sri Siddhartha Medical college, Tumkur, India. This study involved Medical students (M), Journalism undergraduate (JUG) and Journalism postgraduate students (JPG). These students were given a self-made questionnaire regarding the awareness of mental illness. Informed consent was taken before this questionnaire was given to them and they were told regarding the confidentiality that will be maintained about their responses. A total of 210 students were surveyed, 70 in each group to know their perception of awareness about mental illness.

The questionnaire consisted of questions regarding contact with psychiatrist during their lifetime for self, family and friends, about exposure to psychiatry/psychology as one of the subjects during their course. Also, there were questions enquiring about their perception of portrayal of mental illness in movies and media, confidence in reporting of issue with mental illness and need for journalists to have basic knowledge about mental illness. Most of the questions had responses like positively, negatively, can't say and not applicable. They were also asked about the perceived cause of mental illness and source of information regarding mental illness from a list of choices and were told to choose as many choices as possible.

Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis was done using SAS version 9.3. Analysis was done for these 4 variables in the questionnaire i.e. Portrayal in movies, Portrayal in media, Confidence in reporting an issue related to mental illness (treating in case of medical student) and need for Journalist to have basic knowledge about mental illness (Journalist Knowledge). Only the polar opposites (positive and negative responses) were considered. Chi-Square test was considered for the analysis and wherever the cell value was less than 5, Fisher's exact test was used. All the analysis was considered at 5% level of significance. Responses to perceived cause and source of information regarding mental illness were tabulated using frequencies and percentages.

Results

The data obtained from 70 participants in each group was analyzed for the 3 groups together. The data were also analyzed combining the JUG and JPG into Journalism group and compared versus Medical group. Further, the two groups of journalism JUG and JPG were also compared in a similar fashion. The data was analyzed to make out the difference in perceived awareness regarding mental illness among the groups concerned.

This survey was conducted for both males and females of 3 groups of students in the age range of 17-32 years. The sample comprised of 58% males and 42% females. 56.6% belonged to urban areas and the remaining 43.3% were from rural background. More than 90% of students belonged to Hindu religion. Table 1 represents the demographic details of the participants involved.

Only 9 out of 210 respondents stated that they have a family history of mental illness, however, almost 31 respondents stated that they have come in contact with a psychiatrist in their lifetime with regard to consultation for self, family or friend. And almost 143 respondents stated that they have studied psychiatry/psychology during their course. And when asked about the exposure to patients with mental illness during their course, 96 of them agreed to have been exposed.

For the question regarding the portrayal of mental illness in movies, majority of JUG students (83.3%) believed that it was portrayed positively. However, majority of the medical students (75%) believed that it was portrayed negatively. Among

the JPG students, 59.5% felt that the portrayal in the movies was in negative light. When analyzed, portrayal in movies showed significance with a p-value of <0.0001 which means there was a difference in the belief regarding portrayal of mental illness in movies when 3 groups (JUG, JPG and M) were considered. It means medical students believe that in movies, mental illness is portrayed negatively rather than positively, as believed by journalism students. Similar results were obtained when these were analysed for JUG versus JPG ($p<0.0001$) and JUG+JPG versus M ($p=0.0001$). JUG students perceived that movies portray mental illness positively than the JPG and Medical students.

Regarding the portrayal of mental illness in media, majority of journalism students believed that it was portrayed positively (JUG-97.2% and JPG-81.1%). In contrast, only 62.5% of the medical students believed that mental illness is portrayed positively in media. When analyzed statistically, it showed significance with a p-value of 0.0008. Similar results were obtained when these were analysed for JUG versus JPG ($p=0.0252$) and JUG + JPG versus M ($p=0.0010$). It again means that more number of JUG students have a perception that portrayal of mental illness in media is positive compared to JPG and medical students.

When asked about their confidence in reporting an issue with/treating mental illness, 94% and 88% of JUG and JPG students believed that they were confident in reporting it. Majority of the medical students (70.8%) also felt confident of treating mental illness. When analyzed between the 3 groups, it showed statistical significance with a p-value of 0.0017. But when the same was compared between JUG and JPG groups, the results were not significant ($p=0.2262$), it means JUG and JPG students responded similarly when it comes to reporting an issue of mental illness. When it comes to the question whether journalist should have a basic knowledge about mental illness, all the 3 groups agreed to it which is evident as there was no statistical significant between the 3 groups and even same result was obtained when split into 2 groups JUG versus JPG and JUG+JPG versus M. Table 2 depicts the numbers and analysis carried out for these parameters.

When they were asked about the perceived cause of mental illness and were told to select as many choices from the list, Stress was considered as a cause of mental illness by almost 90% of the subjects, irrespective of the group. In contrast, alcohol/drug addiction was perceived as a cause by a small proportion of JUG (12.8%) and JPG (34.3%) students, compared to medical students (70%). Only 4.3% of JUG and 17.1% of JPG students attributed mental illness to genetic causes. However, 47.1% of medical students selected genetics as a possible cause of mental illness. 61.4% of medical students and 45.7% of JPG students felt that poor parenting can lead to mental illness. The responses to other options are listed in Table 3.

Regarding the responses to source of information regarding mental illness, 81.4% of the medical students felt their professional course was an important source, compared to only 25.7% of JUG students and 22.8% of JPG. Print media was the source of information for 80% of JPG students, 40% of JUG students and 28.6% of medical students. Internet, family/friends and mental health professionals

were considered as a source of information by only a minority of the subjects (Table 4).

Discussion

Common man's knowledge and awareness of mental illness is usually limited to information that is disseminated through movies and media. However, there is no system to ensure that this information is correct and therefore, the awareness levels of those reporting these issues, become important. The health information on media has been with little reliance on evidence or experts. In one study, a total of 1,279 health-related news articles were identified and assessed. Out of these, only 318 articles used certain type of evidence to report health issues (39.8% sought experts' opinions and 5.9% referenced peer-reviewed research studies). [13] Also, the sports and business-related articles are usually covered by respective specialized journalists, but such a trend for reporting of health related issues is not common in India. To bring some clarity into this important aspect, the study was planned to assess the perceived awareness levels of the journalism students in comparison with the medical students. Authors could not find similar studies done in the past and hence care has been taken to discuss the present study's findings keeping in mind the current journalism trends and general expectations.

As per the results obtained in this study, a greater number of journalism students believed that mental illness was portrayed positively in the movies and media than the medical students. This is an important finding because medical students can be assumed to have a better understanding of the mental illness and the journalism students' perception was not on the same lines as those of medical students. We can also infer from the findings that, because the journalism students already believe that mental illness is portrayed positively in media, there will be little effort from their side to refine their knowledge levels in order to improve the reporting of such issues.

As the journalist acts as a medium between the public and medical health professionals, it is imperative for the journalist to have adequate and correct knowledge regarding mental illness. With respect to their perception of need of basic knowledge about mental illness the journalist should have, all the 3 groups responded in the same way. This shows that the intention to upgrade their knowledge about mental illness is present. However, unless there is insight as to whether the current awareness levels are adequate and credible, there may not be additional effort to improve the same.

When they were asked about the perceived cause of mental illness and were told to select as many choices from the list, stress was considered as a cause of mental illness by almost 90% of the subjects, irrespective of the group. This is not surprising considering the general acceptance in the society about the same. However, majority of the journalism students (both UG & PG) could not relate alcohol/drug addiction and genetics as important cause for mental illness [14]. This is a very important finding because unless the biological basis of mental illness is accepted by the general population, it may be difficult to decrease stigma by improving acceptance of mental illness. This also explains the frequent

media reports which attempt to find a cause or rationale (other than mental illness) for events like suicides (in the background of depression) and certain crimes (homicides in the background of delusional disorders etc). When a simplified reason could not be attributed for the event, reporters would state that “the cause was not yet determined” instead of highlighting the biological factors. [15] Also, considering the role of mental illness in a vast majority of suicides, it may be inappropriate to attribute suicide to a single social condition like break-up or loss of job. [16]

Regarding the responses to source of information regarding mental illness, 81.4% of the medical students felt their professional course was an important source, compared to only a quarter of Journalism students. Print media was the source of information for majority of Journalism students. Although this finding is not surprising, it should alert us to the vital need to provide more exposure regarding mental health to journalism students as part of their course instead of them relying on media itself for updating their knowledge. Unless, the reporting of mental health related issues become more accurate and scientific, correct information cannot be disseminated to the general population, thus hampering any efforts to decrease stigma and improve awareness.

Conclusion

As quoted by Stephen Hawking, “The greatest enemy of knowledge is not ignorance; it is the illusion of knowledge”. Although the journalism students realize the importance of being familiar with mental health issues, there are many obstacles in achieving the same. Unlike medical students, they perceived the portrayal of mental illness in movies and media as positive, which may not actually be true in majority of cases. Also, they received most of the information regarding mental health from media itself, instead of their professional course. The need of the hour is to sensitize journalism students and the media about these issues either through proactive outreach or policy decisions in order to improve the overall awareness levels of the community.

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Tables

Table 1
Demographic details

Course	Age range (years)	Gender	Domicile
JUG	17-26	42 (M); 28 (F)	11 (U); 59 (R)
JPG	20-30	38 (M); 32 (F)	18 (U); 52 (R)
M*	20-32	42 (M); 28 (F)	62 (U); 8 (R)

M=Male; F=Female; U=Urban; R=Rural; JUG; Journalism undergraduate students;

JPG=Journalism post-graduate students; M*=Medical students

Table 2
Positive and negative responses for various questions and its statistical significance

	JUG	JPG	M	P-value
Portrayal in movies	P - 35 (83.3%) N - 7 (16.7%)	P - 15 (40.5%) N - 22 (59.5%)	P - 9 (25%) N - 27 (75%)	<0.0001
Portrayal In media	P - 35 (97.2%) N - 1 (2.8%)	P - 43 (81.1%) N - 10 (18.9%)	P - 25 (62.5%), N - 15(37.5%)	0.0008
Reporting Issue/treating	P - 63 (94%) N - 4 (6%)	P - 59 (88%) N - 8 (12%)	P - 34 (70.8%) N - 14 (29.2%)	0.0017
Need for knowledge related to mental illness	P - 69 (100%) N - 0 (0%)	P - 70 (100%) N - 0 (0%)	P - 64 (97%) N - 2 (3%)	0.1026

P=Positive responses

N=Negative responses

JUG=Journalism undergraduate students

JPG= Journalism post-graduate students

M=Medical students

*Significance is p value less than 0.05

Table 3
Perceived cause of mental illness in three groups

Perceived cause/frequency	JPG-n (%)	JUG-n (%)	M-n (%)
Stress	59 (84.3)	67 (95.7)	66 (94.3)
Alcohol/drug addiction	24 (34.3)	9 (12.8)	49 (70.0)
Head injury	16 (22.8)	8 (11.4)	34 (48.6)
Genetics	12 (17.1)	3 (4.3)	33 (47.1)
Chemical imbalance	23 (32.8)	13 (18.6)	26 (37.1)
Lack of self control	32 (45.7)	16 (22.8)	30 (42.8)
Poor parenting	32 (45.7)	5 (7.1)	43 (61.4)

JUG=Journalism undergraduate students

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JPG= Journalism post-graduate students

M=Medical students

n=Number of subjects

Table 4
Source of information regarding mental illness as perceived by three groups

Source of information/frequency	JPG- n (%)	JUG- n (%)	M- n (%)
Your professional course	16 (22.8)	18 (25.7)	57 (81.4)
Print media	56 (80.0)	28 (40.0)	20 (28.6)
Audio-visual media	41 (58.6)	25 (35.7)	20 (28.6)
Internet	16 (22.8)	16 (22.8)	21 (30.0)
Family and friends	15 (21.4)	8 (11.4)	11 (15.7)
Mental Health Professionals	15 (21.4)	38 (54.3)	24 (34.3)

JUG=Journalism undergraduate students

JPG= Journalism post-graduate students

M=Medical students

n=Number of subjects