

Medical Students' Attitudes Toward Psychiatry in a Korean Medical College

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One hundred fifty four senior medical students responded to a questionnaire regarding attitudes toward psychiatry. A majority of students were favorable about psychiatric education, psychiatric consultation, and psychoanalysis. Students with more interest in psychiatry as a career showed both positive and negative views about psychiatry. They were more aware of psychiatry's drawbacks: psychiatrists' low income and other physicians' criticism. Future surgeons were more negative about psychiatry than were other physicians. Psychiatric programs should be organized not only for improving the negative views of the students who are choosing psychiatry, but for enhancing positive views of those who will not enter psychiatry. From this perspective, consultation-liaison psychiatry deserves an expansion of its role in the clinical clerkship.

Key Words: Medical students, attitudes toward psychiatry, psychiatric programs, consultation-liaison psychiatry

There have been a number of reports about medical students' attitudes toward psychiatry (Eron 1955; Ghadirian and Englesmann 1981; Nielsen and Eaton 1981; Yager *et al.* 1982; Singer *et al.* 1986; Harsch and Young 1988; Perry *et al.* 1988). They offer some suggestions for us in various aspects. First, they illuminate what influences the choice of psychiatry as a career (Weissman and Bashook 1980; Nielsen and Eaton 1981). Second, they can help educators to develop high quality education programs for students (Yager *et al.* 1982). Finally, they can predict nonpsychiatric physicians' relationships with psychiatrists in the future, because today's students will be tomorrow's nonpsychiatric housestaff and faculty (Nielsen and Eaton 1981). This points to the efficiency of future consultation-liaison activity.

Nonpsychiatric physicians' negative attitudes were attributed to ineffective psychiatric education and clinical clerkship during the undergraduate period (Funkenstein 1965; Nielsen 1980). In particular, the significance of psychiatric education can not be overemphasized as the majority of mental health problems are being treated by nonpsychiatric physicians

whose exposure to the treatment of emotional problems is mainly in their undergraduate years (Hull 1981).

In this country, medical students go through 2 years of premedical courses and 4 years of medical courses. During the premedical period at Yonsei University, they learn liberal arts and basic sciences, of which psychology is one of the lectures relevant to psychiatry. The curriculum at Yonsei University College of Medicine (YUCM), Seoul, Korea is organized into two components: preclinical courses (from the first year to the first half of the third year) and clinical courses (from the second half of the third year to the fourth year). During the preclinical period, behavioral science and psychiatry courses are taught over each 6 month period. Behavioral science is taught by a variety of clinicians and the Faculty of Preventive Medicine during the first year. It covers biopsychosocial concepts, coping with physical illness, doctor-patient relationship, human sexuality, human behavior, learning, and the psychology of rehabilitation. A psychiatry course taught during the second year includes general concepts, personality development, psychopathology, interview, major clinical entities, various forms of therapy, and Korean society and culture: entities, various forms of therapy, and Korean society and culture.

During the clinical year, the students have a 4-week psychiatric clerkship. They are assigned to the main university hospital for three weeks, and to one of two

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hospitals, another university hospital (Yong Dong Severance Hospital) or Veteran Administration hospital, for one week. They carry their own patient load on an inpatient service, usually three patients during their clerkship, under the supervision of a psychiatry housestaff. In addition, they work in the emergency room, do evaluation on an outpatient service, and have lectures and discussions about clinical issues relevant to consultation-liaison psychiatry, pharmacotherapy, psychotherapy, milieu therapy, interview technique, emergency psychiatry and child psychiatry. However, little opportunity has been offered for most students to have clinical experiences with medical and surgical patients.

The Korean medical students' interest in psychiatry has appeared to increase in recent years. In one study whose samples were selected among all medical students throughout the nation, 8.2% were considering psychiatry as a specialty (Lee *et al.* 1985). However, there have been no reports about medical students' attitudes toward psychiatry in this country. Thus, the author investigated their interest in and attitudes toward psychiatry. These results will not only be a basis for further studies about changing attitudes of medical students toward psychiatry, but also help suggest effective strategies for improving psychiatry's image.

METHODS

Senior medical students at YUCM were given questionnaires at the end of their psychiatric clerkship. A total of 154 (92.8%) of 166 students completed the questionnaire, of which 123 were men and 31 were women. Therefore, the sample can represent the entire class of the senior medical students.

The Korean version of the questionnaire developed by Nielsen and Eaton (1981) was used to assess the students' attitudes and opinions about psychiatry in general and anticipated career choice. They were rated on a three-point scale respectively. The students were categorized into three career interest groups: seniors currently planning to enter psychiatry ($N=14$), seniors who at some point in medical school had listed psychiatry as one of their top three choices but whose current choice was a different specialty ($N=28$), and all remaining seniors ($N=122$). Students' interest in psychiatry was also assessed by answers to the question, "Did you ever previously consider entering psychiatry?". Their responses were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1, "Yes, it's my current choice" to 5, "No, not at all." They were asked to rate the degree (high, low, and no change) of the impact of various

factors on their interest in psychiatry. They were assured about the anonymity of their responses. For statistical analyses of these data, Kendall's J statistics and Mann-Whitney u-test were used.

RESULTS

General Attitudes toward Psychiatry

A majority of students did not agree that entering psychiatry is a waste of medical education (97.4%). With respect to psychiatric consultation, the majority viewed it as beneficial and showed a willingness to refer 'very emotionally upset family members' for psychiatric consultation (90.9%). Most students thought that psychiatry had made great progress in biological aspects (79.2%) and showed positive views about psychoanalysis (82.5%). Most did not view psychiatrists as fuzzy thinkers (79.2%) but thought that psychiatrists tend to overanalyze human behavior (65.6%).

In addition, a considerable number of students viewed psychiatry as attractive because of its intellectual comprehensiveness (68.2%) and denied that psychiatry is unscientific (66.2%). Students were divided as to whether physicians were aware of the importance of listening skill in dealing with their patients' emotional problems. Most students thought that psychiatrists were better at this skill than other physicians (70.8%), but nearly half of the students viewed clinical psychologists or social workers to be as qualified as psychiatrists in management of emotionally disturbed persons (48.1%).

With respect to social criticisms, most students did not believe that psychiatrists abuse their legal powers (53.2%). Most showed neutral responses as to whether psychiatrists make less money than other physicians (65.6%), but the proportion of the students agreeing with this (27.3%) was higher than that of those disagreeing (7.1%).

Students were divided as to whether psychiatry has high status in medicine: 38.3% agreed, 29.9% showed neutral responses, and 31.8% disagreed. Some students noted the criticism of nonpsychiatric faculty and housestaff (18.2%), the attempts of peers and faculty to discourage entrance into the field (4.5%), and the potential stigmatization of students who openly express interest in psychiatry (8.4%). However, most students did not agree that stigmatization or pressure to choose another field was common. There were no significant differences in attitudes toward psychiatry between male and female students.

Table 1. The impact of various factors on students' interest in psychiatry

	N	% of students		
		High	Low	No. Change
Premedical course	150	24.7	42.2	30.5
Behavioral science	151	47.4	24.7	26.0
Psychiatric lecture	152	76.7	7.7	14.3
Psychiatric clerkship	152	81.2	5.1	12.3
Contact with psychiatric faculty and housestaff	152	67.6	9.0	22.1
Contact with psychiatric patients	151	71.5	12.9	13.6
Your own experience seeing a psychiatrist	130	50.6	9.0	24.7
Your family's experiences with psychiatrists	125	10.3	25.9	44.8
Media portrayal of psychiatry	148	34.4	19.5	42.2
Nonpsychiatric faculty's opinions about psychiatry	147	16.8	23.3	55.2
Fellow students' opinions about psychiatry	148	40.2	18.8	37.0
Public opinions about psychiatry	145	21.4	29.8	42.9

Correlation of Attitudes with Interest in Psychiatry

Of the students, 9.1% responded that psychiatry was their current choice, 13.6% 'very seriously' and 16.9% 'somewhat seriously' considered psychiatry as a career choice, but 30.5% never considered psychiatry at all. The students' current career interest (rated on a three point scale) correlated significantly with their previous interest in psychiatry ($J=.38$, $p<.00001$).

Taken as a group, only 6 of the 22 correlations between the career choice variables and the attitude questions were statistically significant. The students with more interest in psychiatry as a career were more likely to agree that psychiatry is a rapidly expanding field of medicine ($J=.20$, $p<.005$). They were more likely to agree that psychiatrists communicate with people better than the average physicians ($J=.14$, $p<.05$), and that psychiatry is attractive as a discipline because it is more intellectually comprehensive than other medical careers ($J=.28$, $p<.0005$). They were also less likely to agree that psychiatrists are fuzzy thinkers ($J=.15$, $p<.05$). On the other hand, they were more aware of psychiatrists' low pay ($J=.16$, $p<.05$) and the critical attitude of nonpsychiatric physicians ($J=.15$, $p<.05$).

The students who were considering medical departments as a career ($N=76$) were more positive about psychiatrists than those who were choosing surgical departments as a career ($N=64$). The former students were less likely to agree that psychiatrists risk being associated with a group of other would-be psychiatrists who are often seen by others as odd, peculiar or neurotic ($u=1841.0$, $p<.05$). They tended

to deny that psychiatrists are fuzzy thinkers ($u=2097.5$, $p<.1$).

Factors Influencing Interest in Psychiatry

The impact of various factors on interest in psychiatry was given in Table 1. Medical college courses relevant to psychiatry were rated as most greatly influencing students' interest in psychiatry. They included psychiatric clerkship, psychiatric lectures, interaction with psychiatric patients, and contact with psychiatric faculty and housestaff. Among them, the clinical clerkship was found to most greatly stimulate interest in psychiatry. However, family experiences with psychiatrists, nonpsychiatric physicians' opinions, and public opinions about psychiatry had the least impact on the students' interest in psychiatry.

DISCUSSION

Of senior medical students, 9.1% ($N=14$) were choosing psychiatry as a career, which suggests that there are no problems related to psychiatric recruitment in the YUCM hospital. In addition, the fact that 30.5% of medical students seriously considered psychiatry as a career indicates that they may be a substantial reservoir of potential support for psychiatry in the future.

A majority of students viewed psychiatry as a worthwhile medical specialty by disagreeing that entering psychiatry is a waste of time. A considerable number of students considered psychiatric consultation as beneficial, even though they had little opportunity to have clinical experiences in the field. This

result seems to have been affected by the lecture about consultation-liaison (C-L) psychiatry during the clinical clerkship. It might have also been related to the active atmosphere of C-L psychiatry in the hospital since the C-L service was organized in 1985. Most students were positive about psychoanalysis, although psychoanalytic psychotherapy was not performed during the clerkship. This result might be due to their confusion about the difference between psychoanalysis and brief dynamic psychotherapy. In addition, the position of psychoanalysis in psychiatric history could influence their views about psychoanalysis.

The percentage of the students agreeing with the statement about nonpsychiatric physicians' criticism of psychiatry (18%) was not so remarkable, when compared with that of the survey in the United States (58%) (Nielsen and Eaton 1981). On the other hand, medical students were divided as to whether or not psychiatry has high status. About one-third of respondents still considered the status of psychiatry to be low relative to other medical disciplines. Such a negative view might be related to the relatively low profile of psychiatrists during nonpsychiatric clerkships and the perception that many students viewed psychiatry as isolated from medicine (Nielsen and Eaton 1981).

The medical students' current career interest in psychiatry correlated significantly with their previous interest in the field. It suggests that most of the students considering psychiatry as a career choice showed a considerable interest in psychiatry long before entering the clinical clerkship.

The students who chose psychiatry as a specialty or who had stronger than average interest in the field viewed psychiatry more favorable; they were more impressed by its intellectual comprehensiveness, by its rapid expansion, and by psychiatrists' superiority over other physicians in communication skills. They were also less critical of psychiatrists. However, they were more aware of some drawbacks: psychiatrists' low pay and other physicians' critical attitudes. The findings suggest that medical students do consider psychiatry as a career, although they recognize these negative factors about psychiatry.

Future surgeons were more critical of psychiatrists than were other physicians. This indicates that there may be more obstacles to effective psychiatric consultation for surgical patients than for medical patients in the future.

Most students considered that both the preclinical lecture and clerkship experiences about psychiatry had most greatly influenced their interest in psychiatry. In particular, clinical clerkship was the most potent factor influencing interest in psychiatry, as confirmed by

other studies (Linnet 1977; Eagle and Marcos 1979; Maxmen 1979; Ghadirian and Englesmann 1981; Nielsen and Eaton 1981; Spiegel 1981). However, it should be considered that the medical students were likely to be greatly influenced by the clinical clerkship, because the questionnaires were given at the end of the clerkship. Students' interaction with psychiatric faculty and housestaff also stimulated considerable interest in psychiatry. These data indicate that interpersonal experiences through the clerkship most greatly influenced students' interest in psychiatry, as suggested by other studies (Eagle and Marcos 1979; Maxman 1979; Orleans *et al.* 1980; Nielsen and Eaton 1981; Yager *et al.* 1982).

In conclusion, the above results suggest that any psychiatric education programs should be organized not only for rectifying the negative views of the students who will choose psychiatry as a specialty, but also for enhancing positive views of those who will enter other specialties. From this perspective, consultation-liaison psychiatry deserves an expansion of its role in the clinical clerkship, which was noted to be the most potent factor influencing the medical students' interest in psychiatry.

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