

Examining the Attitude of Medical Students Towards the Specialized Field of Psychiatry and Choosing it as a Field of Study

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Selecting a residency field is crucial for physicians, with psychiatry being a less popular choice among graduates. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate the factors that influence medical students' attitudes towards psychiatry to enhance their education. The purpose of this study was to investigate the attitudes of medical students towards the specialized field of psychiatry.

Materials and Methods: This cross-sectional study, conducted in 2021 at Kerman University of Medical Sciences, involved a sample size of 348 individuals. Data collection was conducted using a researcher-designed questionnaire. The studied variables were analyzed using Pearson correlation, ANOVA, and independent t-test. Data were analyzed by SPSS V.24 at the level of significance less than 0.05.

Results: The results of our study showed that the mean score of attitudes in the students was 59.54 ± 13.22 (21–96), which had no statistically significant relationship with age (P -value = 0.242), marital status (P -value = 0.46), gender (P -value = 0.827), GPA (P -value = 0.961), or level of education (P -value = 0.188). Also, it was found that 45.4% were against choosing psychiatry as a specialized field, 19.6% had no opinion, and only 35% agreed with choosing it as a specialized field.

Conclusion: The study found that students had a positive attitude toward psychiatry, but their low interest in pursuing it suggests the need for targeted training programs to raise awareness and promote it as a viable career option alongside other fields.

Keywords: Psychiatry, Students, Medical Education, Attitude

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Introduction

Higher education institutions and academic centers are considered some of the most important factors for a country's growth because they are responsible for the admission and training of students in various fields (1, 2). Attracting medical students to the field of psychiatry is considered a significant issue. Stakeholders believe that when medical students enter their faculties, they face a negative attitude towards this specialty, despite many students having a special talent for it. Therefore, examining the attitudes of medical students toward choosing psychiatry as a specialty is very important. Given the high prevalence of mental disorders in society and the policy approach focused on prevention and decentralization of mental health services, mental health education and the development of active community participation are priorities in the country's health programs. Since active community participation is related to attitudes, and considering that medical students will be the future leaders of mental health teams in rural healthcare centers, this research aims to understand the challenges of primary prevention by examining the attitudes of medical students at Kerman University of Medical Sciences toward the field of psychiatry. On the other hand, improving the quality of healthcare services is a key factor in a country's development, making the training of the necessary human resources particularly important (3). In this regard, to create constructive changes, it is essential to have descriptive information about the current situation and an understanding of students' attitudes toward their field of study. Using this information, we can strengthen positive factors and address negative ones, thereby enhancing students' satisfaction with their academic programs (4). The increase in knowledge and more effective treatments has improved attitudes among the general public and health-related professions toward mental health centers and the treatment of psychiatric patients (5). However, inappropriate attitudes toward patients and mental illnesses widely persist among the general public, students, and medical professionals (5). A positive outlook on one's career future will bring job motivation (6). The creation of frustration and the emergence of job insecurity feelings among healthcare graduates can lead to the waste of the country's material and spiritual resources (7). When there is an excessive supply of a specialty in society, it leads to a decrease in graduates' income, and gradually the desire to pursue further education and work in that field diminishes (8).

In today's advanced world, attracting medical students to the field of psychiatry has become a significant challenge (9). Medical students are facing an

increasingly negative attitude toward this field. Therefore, examining the attitudes of medical students is very important, as it influences their choice of psychiatry as a specialty (10). Most students believe that factors such as dealing with psychiatric texts, having close interactions with a psychiatric patient, visiting the psychiatric department of an institution or hospital, experiencing significant family issues, and having connections with a drug or alcohol addict affect their attitude toward choosing psychiatry as a specialty (10). Therefore, identifying and addressing common misconceptions among medical students about this field, enhancing their personal attitudes, and making changes in teaching methods during various educational stages—especially in the post-basic sciences courses—are recommended (10).

Other countries have also noted this negative perception. Only about 3-5% of recently graduated doctors in Britain chose psychiatry as their first career choice from 1974 to 2009, according to an analysis of their career choices (9), and other countries have reported similar trends (8). Australia reported a shortage of psychiatrists in its 2012 report, estimating that by 2025 this situation will significantly worsen, resulting in a shortage of 452 psychiatrists (8, 11, 12).

This study aimed to investigate the attitudes of medical students at Kerman University of Medical Sciences toward the field of psychiatry, given the high prevalence of mental disorders in society and the fact that they will lead mental health teams in rural health and treatment centers in the future.

Materials and Methods

Setting and Sample

This study is cross-sectional and was conducted in 2021 at Kerman University of Medical Sciences. Enrollment in the clinical phase of Kerman's medical school during the research year was the inclusion criteria. Additionally, a lack of interest or willingness to participate in the study was considered the exclusion criterion. In this study, simple random stratified sampling was used. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we distributed the questionnaire to students online after determining the study sample. Those who voluntarily expressed their willingness to participate were provided with the necessary explanations regarding the study's objectives, confidentiality, and privacy of personal information, and they were asked to respond to the questionnaire honestly and with complete attention.

Sample Size

In this study, the research population consists of clinical students from the Kerman University of Medical Sciences. The participants were selected from students engaged in internship, residency, and assistantship programs. The sample size was calculated using Cochran's formula. Ultimately, a sample size of 348 individuals was determined (10). Each academic level was considered a stratum, and sampling was conducted randomly in proportion to the number of students in each level (based on a lottery from the list of students available in the education office). If any of the selected students did not wish to participate in the study, a substitute participant was chosen randomly.

$$n = \frac{Z^2 \times P \times (1 - P)}{D^2}$$

Measurements & Validity and Reliability

1. Demographic tool

The first part included personal and social characteristics, which include age, marital status, gender, grade point average (GPA), and educational level.

2. Attitude Assessment

The second part assessed attitudes, specifically focusing on the attitudes of medical students. This questionnaire contained 21 items that examined students' attitudes. Responses to each item were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, which included options: never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always, corresponding to scores from 1 to 5. The minimum score was 21, which means the lowest positive attitude toward the field of psychiatry, and the maximum score was 105, which signifies the highest positive attitude. It is noteworthy that the validity of the Persian questionnaire provided by the author was initially determined using content validity, based on feedback from at least 8 faculty members. The questionnaire was given to experts for review regarding its face and content validity.

Following the feedback, revisions related to the phrasing of sentences were made, and Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated to assess reliability, with a validity of 0.78 and reliability of 0.82 obtained.

Ethical Considerations

Participants' information was documented after the assignment of a code to each student, and the data remained secret with the researcher. The surveys were gathered anonymously. This research maintained integrity and confidentiality throughout the document evaluation process. Our study aligns with the community's values and traditions and will not impede students' academic advancement. All tenets of the Helsinki Declaration were adhered to. The Ethics Committee of Kerman University of Medical Sciences accepted this study, and an ethics code was acquired (IR.KMU.AH.REC.1400.100).

Statistical and Data Analysis

All student information, including demographic and clinical factors, was documented in a checklist created by the researcher and entered into SPSS V.24. Statistical analyses were presented in two descriptive and analytical sections. In the descriptive section, the mean attitude as the main variable was presented across different groups, and all demographic and clinical characteristics of students were reported based on descriptive criteria. The studied variables were analyzed using Pearson correlation tests for quantitative variables, ANOVA, and t-tests. All tests were conducted at a 0.05 significance level.

Results

The mean age of the individuals studied was 24.82 ± 2.59 years. The average attitude score among the students was 59.54 ± 13.22 , ranging from 21 to 96 (see Tables 1 and 2). Additionally, our findings showed that 45.4% opposed choosing psychiatry as a specialty, 19.6% had no opinion, and only 35% agreed with its selection.

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation of Attitude in Studied Students

			Attitude			
Variables		Count	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	P-value*
Age	Under 25 years old	159	60.45	14.480	1.173	0.242
	25 years and older	189	58.87	12.057		
Marital Status	Single	223	59.93	13.601	0.739	0.46
	Married	125	58.84	12.551		

Gender	Male	223	59.93	13.601	0.219	0.827
	Female	125	58.84	13.551		
Grade Point Average (GPA)	Under 16	128	59.59	13.204	0.049	0.961
	16 and older	220	59.51	13.269		

*: Independent- t

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, the mean attitude scores among the studied students did not show statistically significant differences based on age (P-value = 0.242),

marital status (P-value = 0.46), gender (P-value = 0.827), GPA (P-value = 0.961), and level of education (P-value = 0.188).

Table 2. Mean and Standard Deviation of Attitude in educational level of students

			Attitude			
		Count	Mean	Standard Deviation	F	P-value*
Educational Level	Stager	152	60.63	14.506	1.682	0.188
	Intern	183	59.01	12.204		
	Resident	13	54.31	10.136		
Total Attitude			59.54	13.22		

*: ANOVA

Table 3. Correlation between Attitude in the Studied Students with Age and GPA

		Age	Grade Point Average (GPA)	Attitude
Age	Pearson Correlation coefficient	1	-	-
	P-value*	-	-	-
	Count	348		-
Grade Point Average (GPA)	Pearson Correlation coefficient	0.116	1	-
	P-value*	0.060	-	-
	Count	348	348	-
Attitude	Pearson Correlation coefficient	-0.043	0.071	1
	P-value*	0.420	0.184	-
	Count	348	348	348

*: Pearson

As shown in Table 3, no significant correlation was observed between attitude and age or GPA ($P \geq 0.05$).

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the attitudes of medical students towards the specialty of psychiatry and their decision to choose it as a specialty. The average attitude score among the studied students was 59.594 ± 13.22 (ranging from 21 to 96), which did not have a statistically significant correlation with age, gender, GPA, educational level, or marital status. Furthermore, based on our findings, it was revealed that 45.4% opposed choosing psychiatry as a specialty, 19.6% had no opinion, and only 35% were in favor of selecting it as a specialty. While 84% of second-year medical students and 52% of interns had a positive

attitude toward psychiatry, only 5% of students and 1.8% of interns chose it as a career, according to a study by Charan Singh Jilowa and et al. (13). Most students rejected psychiatry as a specialty, potentially due to inadequate training and negative remarks from other physicians. Although the study observed generally positive attitudes, it did not categorize them definitively. Differences in findings compared to other studies may be due to variations in methodology and sample sizes. A systematic review by Zaza Lyons investigated medical students' attitudes toward psychiatry as a specialty and career, analyzing 32 articles from 22 countries with data from 12,144 students across 74 medical schools. The review found a mix of positive and negative attitudes, with an overall positive outlook, although many students viewed psychiatry as a weak career choice. The study emphasized the need for improvements in the

psychiatry curriculum and innovative educational strategies to enhance students' interest in the field (14). Similarly, the current study found that while students generally had positive attitudes toward psychiatry, 45.4% opposed choosing it as a specialty, indicating a significant reluctance among medical students. In a study conducted by Ellaisha Samari and et al., the majority of students had unfavorable attitudes toward psychiatric patients. Male participants (compared to females: $\beta = -1.190$, $p < 0.05$), participants in the middle-income group (compared to the higher-income group: $\beta = -0.945$, $p < 0.05$), and participants who had average or below-average scores in the psychiatry class (compared to those with higher scores) did not have a favorable attitude toward psychiatry (15). In our study, the attitude did not correlate with the students' gender or GPA. While the overall GPA was analyzed in our study, the GPA specifically for psychiatry was analyzed in the mentioned study. Therefore, it would be beneficial for future studies to consider the psychiatry course score for more accurate results. A study by NC Aghukwa and et al. in Nigeria found that over 60% of medical students favored specialties such as surgery, obstetrics and gynecology, or internal medicine, with less than 2% choosing psychiatry as their first option. Despite 75% acknowledging the benefits and effectiveness of psychiatry, many viewed the profession as having low credibility and status, with more than half considering it only as a last resort for residency. Attitudes toward psychiatry were consistent across age, gender, and GPA (16). Similarly, while the current study reported a higher interest in pursuing psychiatry, it also found that, despite positive attitudes, fewer students were inclined to choose it as a specialty, with no significant differences based on age, gender, or GPA. In a study by Ellaisha Samari, most students reported that engagement with psychiatric texts, patients, and experiences significantly shaped their views on psychiatry. Only 16.4% ranked psychiatry among their top three specialties, while 68% expressed low to very low interest, and 32% showed high to very high interest. Additionally, over 50% of clinical students felt their psychiatry training was inadequate. The study suggests the need for varied teaching methods to enhance motivation and understanding while addressing misconceptions (15). Similarly, while more students in our study desired to pursue psychiatry, demographic factors showed no significant variations in attitudes. Mozalomi et al. conducted a descriptive-cross-sectional study of 128 medical students at Shahid Sadoughi University, finding a mean attitude score of 5.7 ± 32.86 . The study revealed a negative correlation between academic year and attitude scores, indicating that student attitudes toward psychiatry declined with progress through their studies. Only 16.4% intended to

select psychiatry as a top specialty, with 68% reporting low interest. Additionally, 51.51% of clinical students found training inadequate (10). The findings emphasized the need for diverse teaching methods to improve student motivation and address misconceptions in psychiatry education. Future studies should consider larger sample sizes. Firoozabadi et al. found that about 25% of first-year and 33% of final-year students chose psychiatry as their future profession, with no significant differences in attitudes between the two groups. The study concluded that negative perceptions of psychiatry might arise from student misconceptions or realities in the field, suggesting a need for education reform in this area (17). Strengths of this article include the development and determination of the validity and reliability of the attitude questionnaire, as well as the examination of students' attitudes toward the field of veterinary medicine. The limitations of this study include the small sample size and the examination conducted in only one province.

Conclusion

The study found that students had a positive attitude toward psychiatry, but their low interest in pursuing it suggests the need for targeted training programs to raise awareness and promote it as a viable career option alongside other fields. Establishing mentorship programs connecting students with psychiatrists and providing career counseling can outline diverse opportunities in the field. Encouraging interdisciplinary collaborations will demonstrate the relevance of mental health across various medical specialties. Additionally, launching campaigns to reduce stigma around mental health careers and promote positive narratives about psychiatry can be beneficial. Finally, increasing early hands-on clinical exposure in psychiatry will allow students to engage more directly with the field.

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Conflict of Interest

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Supervision, Project Administration: AG, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data Curation: YB, Writing– Original Draft Preparation, Writing– Review & Editing, Visualization: MA

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