

A WORLD PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION INITIATIVE TO INCREASE INTEREST IN PSYCHIATRY AS A CAREER IN QATAR MEDICAL STUDENTS: A PILOT STUDY

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SUMMARY

Introduction: The World Health Organization identified a chronic shortage of psychiatrists in Low- Middle- and High-Income Countries. In Qatar, the situation is dire with reports there is one psychiatrist per 170,000 people in the population. A one-day, student-led mental-health conference was held in Doha, Qatar under the auspices of the World Psychiatric Association with the aim of increasing interest in psychiatry as a career.

Subjects and methods: In this single-arm, pre-post comparison study, a questionnaire assessing interest in psychiatry as a career was administered on participants before and after attending the conference. Demographic information was obtained and response items were on a 5-point Likert scale. Statistical analysis was performed using a two-sample t-test with a significant p-value set at <0.05.

Results: The conference was attended by 102 individuals. Fifty-four attendees completed the pre-conference survey (53% response rate) and 36 participants completed the post-conference survey (35% response rate). Data for the 36 matched pre-post responses were included in our analyses. The average age of respondents was 22 years and 81% were female. There was improvement in post-conference results however these changes were not statistically significant.

Conclusion: To the best of our knowledge this is the first intervention study on increasing interest in psychiatry as a career carried out in Qatar. It is likely that psychiatry enthusiasts attended the conference and therefore their interest in this medical specialty was already high as corroborated by the favorable pre-conference survey results. This might explain why there was a lack of statistical significance in comparison to post- intervention scores. We recommend that such an event be integrated into the medical school curricula throughout Qatar to include students with low baseline interest in psychiatry. Further research in this area with more robust methodology is urgently needed to help narrow the pervasive treatment gap.

Key words: recruitment in psychiatry - medical students - World Psychiatric Association - Qatar

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INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organization, there is a global shortage of 10.3 million healthcare professionals, expecting to rise to 12.9 million by 2035 (WHO Global Observatory for eHealth & World Health Organization, 2016). Psychiatry is no exception to the growing workforce shortage. Indeed, over the past 20-years, there was a 1:3 increase in psychiatrists' numbers compared to population number (Sederer 2015). By 2024 in the U.S., there will be 39,000 psychiatrists, an estimated psychiatrists' deficiency of 14,000-31,000 (Satiani et al. 2018). There is a global increase in demand of mental health services and decreasing availability (Butryn et al. 2017). Hence, initiatives are targeting relevant populations to spark academic and clinical interest in the field (Hankir et al. 2019).

Introduction of psychiatry services in Qatar is relatively recent, as it was first established in 1971. By 1995, for a population of 400,00, there were 56 psychiatry beds (Ghuloum & Ibrahim 2006). Although by 2017 the number of inpatient acute beds increased to 69, given the population of 2.2 million, a major improvement is pressing and necessary. This deficit is also mirrored in human resources. In 2014, collective mental health providers represented 1 person per 7,400 people in Qatar, amounting to 3.04 psychiatrists per 100,000 people. In countries of upper-middle socioeconomic backgrounds, this is lower than half the median rate (Sharkey 2017).

Therefore, we hypothesized that a day-long student-led mental health conference, organized in collaboration with the World Psychiatric Association (WPA), will reduce mental health stigma and increase interest in psychiatry as a career in medical students in Qatar. The

event, Qatar's Inaugural Medical Students Conference on Psychiatry & Mental Health, was a collaboration between the World Psychiatric Association, Sidra Medicine, and Weill Cornell Medicine-Qatar. It was designed to expose healthcare students to international career paths in psychiatry, improve psychological wellbeing and openly and honestly discuss mental health related stigma and the stigma attached to the psychiatric profession.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

We conducted a single-arm, pre- post- comparison study on participants who attended the WPA Inaugural Student-Led Mental Health and Psychiatry Conference in Doha, Qatar. We collected demographic details and administered a survey (Hankir et al. 2019) on participants before and after exposure to the conference. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Measures

The survey aimed to detect and measure any changes in the views towards psychiatry in the participants before and after exposure to the event and if there was an increase in interest in pursuing this medical specialty as a career. Responses to statements 1 to 5 were on a five-point Likert scale:

- Strongly Agree – 5;
- Agree – 4;
- Neutral – 3;
- Disagree – 2;
- Strongly Disagree - 1

The higher the score the more favourable the response except for statement 6 the items of which were inversely scored.

The statements were as follows:

- *Psychiatry is interesting.*
- *Psychiatry has a positive impact on peoples' lives.*
- *“People with mental illness can achieve success and be the best at what they do.*
- *“I would talk positively about psychiatry to other people.”*
- *“I would consider psychiatry as a career.”*
- *“Seeking help for Mental Health Problems is a sign of weakness.”*

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were carried out on the data obtained. Paired, t-tests were computed to compare the participants' responses to statements before and after exposure to the event. Results were considered statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ with a confidence interval of 95%.

RESULTS

Out of 54 initial responses, 36 participants completed the before and after surveys (response rate 67%). The average age was 21.6 years and respondents' ages ranged from 19-33 years. The majority of attendees were female (80.55%). The educational background of the respondents was diverse as illustrated in figure 1.

The mean score for the first statement, “Psychiatry is interesting” prior to the talk was 4.47 (Standard Deviation (SD)=0.609), and after the talk 4.36 (SD=0.723) without statistically significant change ($p=0.103$) (see Figure 2).

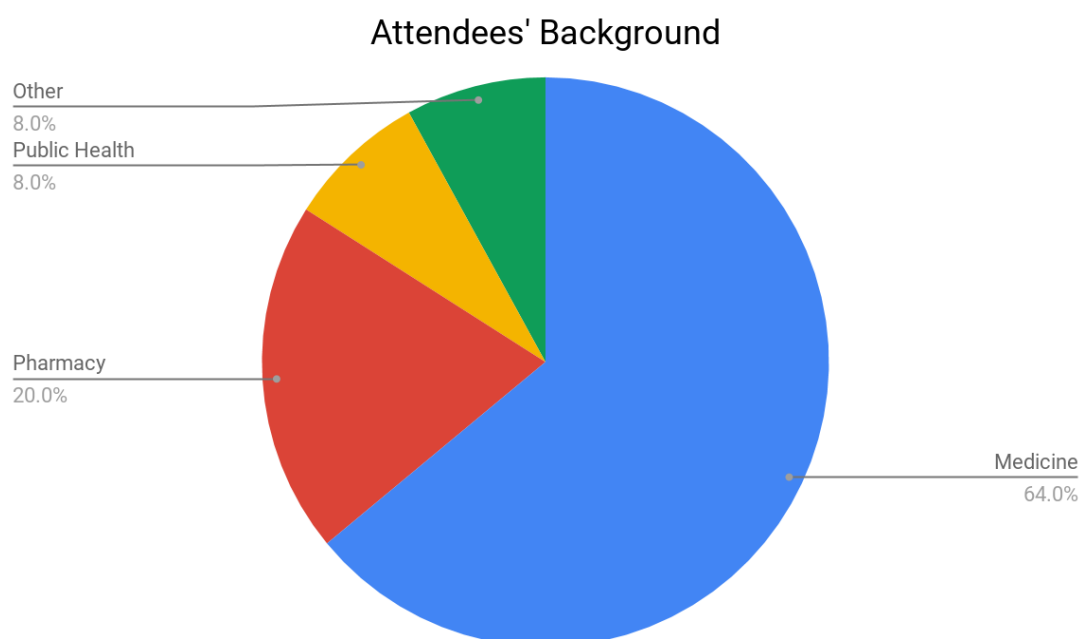


Figure 1. Educational Backgrounds of Registered Attendees

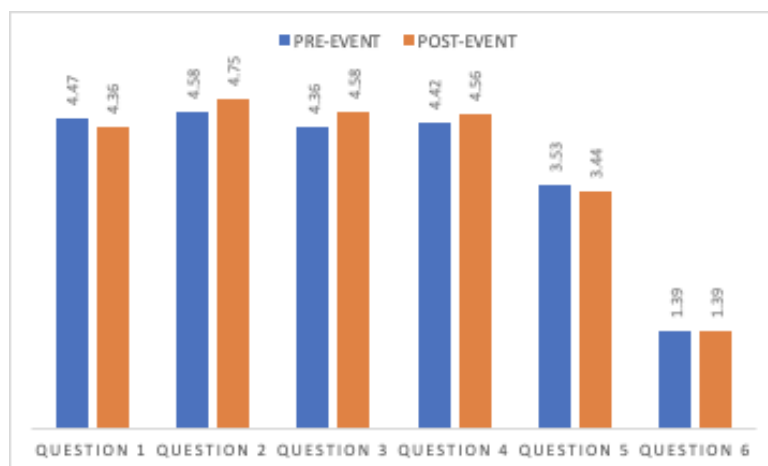


Figure 2. Bar chart with comparison of mean responses for the pre- and post-conference survey

The mean pre-event score for the second statement, “Psychiatry has a positive impact on peoples’ lives” was 4.58 (SD=0.554) and the mean post-event score was 4.75 (SD=0.439) however this increase was not statistically significant ($p=0.083$, see figure 2).

The mean pre-event score for the third statement, “People with mental illness can achieve success and be the best at what they do” was 4.36 (SD=0.899) and the mean post-event score was 4.58 (SD=0.604) however this increase was not statistically significant ($p=0.210$, see figure 2).

The mean pre-event score for the fourth statement, “I would talk positively about psychiatry to other people” was 4.42 (SD=0.649) and the mean post-event score was 4.56 (SD=0.607) however this increase was not statistically significant ($p=0.096$, see figure 2).

The mean pre-event score for the fifth statement, “I would consider psychiatry as a career” was 3.53 (SD=1.108) and the mean post-event score was 3.44 (SD=3.44) however this decrease was not statistically significant ($p=0.446$, see figure 2).

The mean pre-event score for statement six, “Seeking help for mental health problems is a sign of weakness” was 1.39 (SD=0.599) and the mean post-event score was 1.39 (SD=0.688) indicating no change in results (see figure 2).

DISCUSSION

The global shortage of healthcare professionals has negatively impacted mental health services, the demand for which is increasing (Butryn et al. 2017). Psychiatry is not often pursued as a career due to multiple factors including inadequate psychiatry teaching during medical school, misconceptions about careers in psychiatry, and relatively low-income during training amongst others (Khajeddin et al. 2012). As such, the shortage needs to be addressed by developing innovative initiatives to increase recruitment into psychiatry.

The Inaugural Medical Students’ Conference on Mental Health and Psychiatry in Doha, Qatar in collabo-

ration with the World Psychiatric Association aimed to increase interest in psychiatry as a career and raise awareness of the importance of mental health among students. Several carefully curated sessions introducing psychiatry as a career, career pathways in psychiatry, research in psychiatry and medical student mental health were delivered to achieve our aims.

The data suggests that the conference attendees had a favorable view of psychiatry prior to attending the conference, which was likely due to the way in which the conference was advertised. The conference title most likely appealed to students with a prior interest in psychiatry and mental health advocacy. As such, most attendees either agreed or strongly agreed with four out of the six pre-conference statements assessing interest in psychiatry and the perception of mental illness. The paired data showed no statistically significant change after the conference. The fifth question exploring students’ interest in pursuing psychiatry indicated that most attendees had some interest prior to the conference. Although the average response increased after the conference, the difference was not statistically significant. Lastly, the pre-event score for question six was equal to the post-event score indicating that the conference did not change the perceptions of help-seeking for mental health problems in respondents.

CONCLUSION

Even though the data showed no statistically significant change, it nonetheless indicates an improvement in the overall perception of psychiatry. The conference should be further expanded to incorporate a cohort of students with wider specialty interests and integrate allied healthcare students to promote interprofessional education and mirror the multidisciplinary approach in psychiatry. Amongst medical students, an ambassadorship program can be initiated to promote psychiatry amongst peers. In addition, programs can be designed to educate high school students about psychiatry to encourage them to pursue this medical specialty as a career which will help to address the global shortage.

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Conflict of interest: None to declare.

Contribution of individual authors:

Ahmed Hankir conceived the idea and design for this study and contributed to synthesizing and editing the manuscript.

Abdallah Tom, Hania Ibrahim, Aicha Hind Rifai & Durre Shahwar organized the conference, executed the study by distributing and collecting the surveys, collected and analyzed the data and equally contributed to the literature review.

Muhammad Waqar Azeem, Afzal Javed, Zainab Kikelomo Imam & Rashid Zaman are senior academics who oversaw the study, edited the manuscript and provided expert advice on the literature review.

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