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Mental Health of Medical Students in Europe

Authors: Eleftheria Vlachou, Rebecca Bugeja, Alexandra Nobre, Felicity Allman, Natasha

Barbour-Murray.

The European Medical Students´ Association (EMSA) represents medical students across Europe. We envision a healthy and solidary Europe in which medical students actively promote health. EMSA empowers medical students to advocate health in all policies, excellence in medical research, interprofessional healthcare education and the protection of human rights across Europe.

Introduction.

EMSA recognises the importance of mental health as a key component of individual wellbeing for medical students and professionals at both personal and professional levels. These roles are challenging, and, undoubtedly, medical professionals' resilience was being tested even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the pandemic had a disproportionate impact on the mental health of medical students and professionals compared to the general population, an uneven distribution of mental health services in medical schools, institutions and hospitals, as well as a high disregard of mental health issues among those populations. Rates of burnout, anxiety and stigma related to mental health also vary across European countries. Therefore, this policy paper ultimately asserts that there is much more to be done in order to ameliorate mental health within the European medical student population and professionals, starting by raising awareness for mental health with a multitude of endeavours our stakeholders can embark on with the aim of raising awareness. Those initiatives could revolve around advocacy, education and interaction among all stakeholders involved. EMSA strongly believes that the partnership of medical students with various stakeholders interested in this topic is certain to act as a catalyst in the effort to raise awareness about mental health issues of medical students in not only a national but a European level as well.

Problem Statement.

Mental health is of paramount significance for the holistic development of individuals. Some of the more prominent factors affecting mental health include work stress, emotional pressure and overwhelming, constant challenges, which all unquestionably characterise attending medical school and becoming physicians. Despite the considerable absence of surveys assessing the mental health of medical students and physicians in Europe, there has been substantial research evaluating their perspectives on mental health. It appears that medical students show less regard for mental illness, including suicidal ideations, hallucinations and drug use, compared to physical illness (Korszun et al., 2012), and that many medical students, when asked to assess their mental health state, submit dishonest answers due to stereotypes around mental illness and perceived implications that such answers would have (Lewis and Cardwell, 2018). Medical students' reluctance towards appropriate help-seeking has been explained by the students' fear of stigma attached to having a psychiatric disorder and receiving psychiatric treatment, fear of academic vulnerability and implications in subsequent successful career progression and a lack of confidentiality (Midtgaard et al., 2008, Chew-Graham et al., 2003).

Research also suggests that variables, such as the academic year of studies, students' gender and the existence of a mental health history, play a significant role in holding stereotypes around mental illness and stigmatising mentally ill individuals, with females and students who have gone through mental

illness more likely to show high regard. In terms of the academic year of studies, research suggests that, in contrast to the first years of medical school, the closer students get to graduation, the higher the chances are that they undermine the importance of mental health and mental illness (Korszun et al., 2012). This could likely be attributed to the lack of proper education and awareness about the issue within the years of medical school. Unless addressed, this condition is likely to perpetuate bias and stigmatisation towards mental illness among future clinicians of all specialties (Schulze, 2007), including psychiatrists, while it acts as a deterrent to medical students seeking mental health support, when needed.

However, even when medical students overcome their hesitancy to seek mental help, they encounter a striking absence and inadequacy of mental health services within medical faculties in Europe. For instance, in Norway, a general lack of mental health services was observed which contributed towards 54% of participating medical students never seeking help for mental health issues they were experiencing (Midtgaard et al., 2008) and, in the UK, whilst medical students knew about the means of accessing mental health services, they were less likely to accept the help offered and deem receiving help for mental issues unacceptable (Bhugra et al., 2019). Those examples highlight the importance of mental health services and general activities that promote medical students' mental well-being. It is also noted that endeavours as such are also very welcomed by the vast majority of them, who consider mental health services necessary for the proper function of medical schools (Bernhardsdottir and Vilhjalmsson, 2012). Indeed, for the absence of mental health services and the general disregard towards mental illness, it is not just the medical faculties to blame. There is a substantial lack of education and empathy around mental health, reflecting on every aspect of social life. Therefore, the partnership of stakeholders of community, local, state, national, transnational, European and international bodies is of utmost importance in order to sensibilise not only about the mental health of medical professionals but everyone's equally.

Our View. Aim.

We, as EMSA, strongly believe that mental health cannot continue to be viewed as a stigmatised or taboo topic. Furthermore, within the healthcare field, protecting and maintaining the Mental Health of medical students and professionals is vital. "Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?", Latin for 'who guards the guards themselves'; EMSA feels that the Healthcare Field and overall industry should act collaboratively to ensure that mental health is protected and maintained. Considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on health professionals' mental health, which is about to last for many years to come, highlighting the discrepancies in attitude towards mentally ill individuals and acknowledging the existence of prejudice towards mental health, it is now more essential than ever to take action to resolve this issue.

In conclusion, we believe systematic change is required at every level for improvements regarding the advocacy and education around mental health to be realised. Within EMSA, there has been a considerable effort to raise awareness on the topic of mental health. The MEHR pillar has been running a Small Working Group specifically designed to assess the mental state of medical students' across Europe, via the distribution and analysis of our mental health survey, to redact a booklet with non-formal educational activities to be used as an awareness toolkit for stakeholders and FMOs, as well as to gather data regarding the situation of mental health in Europe, including the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable social populations' mental health. This will continue to be an area on which EMSA will work for many years to come until real change within society has been achieved.

Recommendations

EMSA calls upon the European Commission (DG Santé/European Health Union) to:

- maintain a database with statistics on the state of mental health within every member country of the WHO Europe region, including a medical students' reference, to be showcased within the European Mental Health Action Plan,
- assist members states of the European Region toinuditing their mental health services and supporting nations to improve these services based on recommendations made from the audit results,
- provide educational opportunities for medical students in collaboration with other mental health organisations to expose a new generation of medical professionals to the field as an opportunity for conducting further research and knowledge on the subject and to create policies guiding European nations to better their overall mental health.

EMSA calls upon Mental Health Europe to:

- highlight the importance of adequately educated medical students and professionals about mental health issues for the sake of health and compliance with the treatment of mentally ill patients,
- shed light on the mental health of medical students and professionals by conducting annual surveys and mini mental health assessment tests,
- provide mental health services (i.e., therapy, focus groups, self-help manuals, virtual groups etc.) for medical students and professionals who are experiencing or are at the edge of experiencing a mental health issue and require support,
- insist on the introduction of mental health services in every clinical setting and medical faculty,

- organise and support initiatives aimed at educating medical students of all medical faculties across Europe towards mental health and mental illness, as well as towards the proper clinical approach towards patients with mental health issues,

- endorse, support and encourage the work of EMSA and/or FMOs regarding mental health by means of providing input, directions and feedback on a regular basis,

- collaborate with EMSA and/or FMOs in initiatives tackling mental health advocacy, including mental health campaigns, activities and other endeavours which aim to educate the general public and/or medical students on mental health,

- create a communications training initiative for medical students in clinical years and medical professionals in order to avoid discriminating or degrading their mentally ill patient(s).

- record and keep statistics of the abovementioned mental health activities occurring on a regional, national and local level, with the content disseminated as well as feedback on the specific activities included in such reports, which is to be revised and updated every term.

EMSA calls upon the European Medical Association, the European Junior Doctors Association, the Standing Committee of European Doctors, the European Medical Association and the European Union of Medical Specialists to:

- organise and support initiatives aimed at educating medical students of all medical faculties across Europe about mental health and mental illness, as well as about the proper clinical approach towards patients with mental health issues,

- collaborate with EMSA and/or FMOs in initiatives tackling mental health advocacy, including mental health campaigns, activities and other endeavours, with the aim of raising awareness on mental health,

- encourage peer to peer (non-formal) education in terms of the proper approach to mental illness in clinical settings between Junior Doctors and medical students,

- encourage the work of EMSA and/or FMOs regarding mental health by means of providing input, directions and feedback on a regular basis,

- raise awareness on situations in healthcare settings where persons with mental illness are discriminated against and to report such instances to relevant authorities, being an example for medical students.

EMSA calls upon Mental Health Services Providers and the European Federation of Psychiatric Trainees to:

- raise awareness on mental health stigma and its effect on mentally ill individuals, including medical students who experience a mental health issue,

- accentuate the significance of an interdisciplinary approach in terms of educating medical students on mental health issues and tackling stigma,
- raise awareness on situations where persons with mental illness are discriminated against and to report such instances to relevant authorities,
- collaborate with EMSA in the creation of educational opportunities (e.g. research projects dealing with mental health, article publications on mental health) to expand the advocacy for mental health.

EMSA calls upon Student Organisations, including the European Federation of Psychology Students' Associations (EFPSA) to:

- organise activities aimed to educate the general public and various stakeholders involved in the topic of mental health and to maximise the potential impact of those actions,
- contribute to creating and distributing applicable mental health content for students and stakeholders' use, preferably in a digital and, therefore, accessible to everyone, format.
- engage in mental health-related activities deriving from EMSA and/or FMOs and
- create educational opportunities for medical students to be trained in this topic.

EMSA calls on governments and related national institutions to:

- insist on having mental health as a national priority and
- take actions in order to raise the public's awareness on the topic, including organising informative campaigns,
- establish assessment criteria for the mental health of medical students and professionals and conduct national surveys to analyse and draw conclusions from this data,
- encourage the establishment of mental health services within the medical faculties and healthcare places with the aim to assist students and professionals with mental health issues,
- create specific national guidelines in clinical settings that would ensure the lack of discrimination towards mentally ill individuals, including both physicians, students and patients,
- encourage the establishment of Committees within the medical faculties and healthcare places with the aim to discuss any issue of mistreatment due to bias related with mental health taboos and impose sanctions accordingly,
- provide educational opportunities for medical students regarding mental health issues, including research,
- annually evaluate the effectiveness of the available mental health services and take action on improving the weaknesses found.

EMSA calls upon Employers and Human Resources Committees to:

- monitor the wellbeing of their peers and employees through annual/biennial questionnaires or meetings which encourage employees to provide feedback on the wellbeing measures already implemented by the system,
- maintain databases containing information on activities that promote self-care and wellbeing, such as yoga and mindfulness,
- provide access to employees to digital mental health services, e.g. online cognitive behavioural therapy,
- aid their employees to gain access to mental health services provided for by the company or if this is lacking, inform the employees about services found in the community.

EMSA calls upon medical faculties to:

- promote or create mental health services that are accessible and close to student lodgings by collaborating with the local department of social wellbeing as well as mental health professionals affiliated with the university,
- maintain the quality of mental health services offered to students through regular audits, with student satisfaction with the service and change in the students' well-being set as primary indicators for quality assurance,
- collaborate with mental health organisations and/or medical student organisations, including EMSA, to promote and implement activities and teaching materials which aim to educate their medical student cohorts about mental health advocacy,
- incorporate compulsory modules or teachings on managing one's mental health, including soft skills and an introduction to stress coping mechanisms, starting from the early years of medical school within the medical curriculum,
- audit the compulsory modules on managing one's mental health regularly where student stress levels and social skills are considered as primary indicators for these modules' success,
- incorporate units or modules on empowerment soft skills trainings into the medical curriculum,
- ensure that within the subject of Psychiatry, the notion of stigma and prejudice related to mental health is addressed and that students are taught how to holistically and adequately approach mentally ill individuals.

EMSA calls upon FMOs and NCs, including EMSA to:

- prioritise mental health within their annual plan of action and
- organise activities, including campaigns, workshops, trainings and webinars, in order to educate medical students about the equal importance of mental and physical health, the notion of mental health stigma and actions which can improve their mental wellbeing,

- collaborate with other FMOs, NCs or/and EMSA in terms of supporting and implementing mental health activities in a local, national or international level,

- record and keep statistics on mental health activities occurring on a regional, national and local levels, with the content disseminated as well as feedback on the specific activities included in such reports, which is to be revised and updated every term,

- distribute EMSA´s mental health booklet, which comprises information on mental health literacy and mental health advocacy which can be utilised both on an organisational level to create workshops and training sessions as well as on an individual level to improve mental health wellbeing,

- contribute to campaigns aimed at educating subcategories of the general public, e.g. schoolchildren, university students, educators about mental health awareness, promoting mental wellbeing and mental health services offered by the healthcare system, through workshops and/or online content accessible to these groups within society.

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