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MENTAL HEALTH OF MEDICAL STUDENTS AND HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

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Abstract: The mental health of medical students and healthcare professionals has become an increasingly relevant issue due to the high levels of stress, academic pressure and emotional challenges that these individuals face throughout their training and careers. Several studies point to the high prevalence of disorders such as depression, anxiety and burnout, directly impacting academic and professional performance and, ultimately, the quality of patient care. This article reviews the literature on the main risk factors, such as stigma, academic pressures and barriers to accessing psychological care. In addition, it discusses the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of these individuals and proposes effective support models, including psychological support programs, mindfulness and mental health education. The review suggests that the implementation of preventive and educational approaches from the earliest years of training is essential to promote a healthier and more sustainable environment. It highlights the importance of policies that integrate mental health care into both the academic curriculum and work environments, in order to prevent serious consequences and improve the general well-being of students and professionals.

Keywords: Mental health. Health professionals. Burnout. Academic stress. Psychological support.

INTRODUCTION

The mental health of medical students and healthcare professionals is a topic of growing relevance, given the intense pressure and challenges they face throughout their training and careers. The literature reveals a high prevalence of mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and even suicidal ideation among medical students, reinforcing the need for appropriate interventions and psychological support.

In 2018, Dickson examined the mental health of medical students in the United States, pointing out that many face barriers to accessing wellness programs, even when their mental conditions directly impact their academic performance. The author pointed out that the literature on well-being among these students lacks consistent data, suggesting the importance of more structured and longitudinal data collection to better understand the prevalence of disorders such as anxiety and depression - risk factors for suicide.

In 2020, Eleftheriades and collaborators investigated the mental health challenges faced by academic trainees, concluding that academic pressure and competition for prestigious positions have contributed to increased rates of depression and other mental disorders among university students. This study revealed that the decline in the emotional health of undergraduate students underscores the need to integrate wellness strategies into the academic experience.

Another 2020 study of medical students from the US and Canada revealed a high prevalence of depression and anxiety, with the majority of students reporting significant stress in their studies. The authors suggested that academic pressure can predispose to long-term mental health problems, recommending that medical schools implement stress management and psychological support programs.

In 2022, Constantinou et al. reviewed faculty training in recognizing psychological symptoms in medical students, underlining the importance of more robust psychological support. The research indicated that the prevalence of mental disorders remains high, with alarming rates of suicidal ideation, especially among female students. The authors argue that stigmatization and the demands of the course are central factors contributing to this worrying picture.

More recently, in 2024, Als Salman and colleagues explored the barriers faced by medical students in Saudi Arabia in seeking mental health services. Although they recognize the importance of mental health, many students hesitate to seek help due to factors such as financial limitations, lack of access and cultural norms. This resistance to treatment can have significant consequences for students' health and the quality of care they will provide in the future.

These studies collectively paint a worrying picture of mental health among medical students and healthcare professionals, highlighting the urgency of a systematic approach to dealing with these challenges and promoting a healthier and more sustainable learning environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The article "*Depression, Anxiety, and Suicidality in U.S. Medical Students: A Literature Review and Commentary*" by Kate Dickson (2018) critically analyzes the mental health of medical students in the United States, addressing issues such as depression, anxiety and suicide. Dickson highlights students' difficulties in accessing the necessary support, which often results in exclusion from available wellness initiatives.

A crucial point is the inadequacy of academic support for students whose anxiety interferes with their performance, indicating a systemic failure to identify and meet mental health needs. The author also highlights the lack of assistance at critical moments, such as during clinical routines, which contributes to a scenario of stress and helplessness, exacerbating mental health problems. The review points out that the literature tends to underestimate the severity of anxiety and suicidality compared to depression, leading to a bias in the approach and suggesting the need for more comprehensive data collection to develop appropriate interventions.

The article "*The Challenges and Mental Health Issues of Academic Trainees*" (Eleftheriades et al., 2020) examines the difficulties faced by academic trainees in a highly competitive environment. The authors suggest that the pressure to obtain prominent positions and good earnings has been increasing since high school, generating a high-stress environment. In addition, the rapid expansion in the number of doctoral trainees, which outpaces the growth of the academic job market, intensifies competition and cultural tensions within academia.

The data shows that university students have more compromised mental health compared to the general population, with high rates of depression and distress. The analysis suggests that raising awareness of mental health in universities aims to reduce the adverse effects of academic pressure.

The study "*Understanding the Health Risks in Basic Science Medical Students: A Cross-sectional Survey*" (2020) looks at the mental health of medical students in the United States and Canada, revealing an alarming prevalence of depression and anxiety, as well as a higher level of psychological distress than the general population. The authors note that academic pressure leads to problems such as sleep disorders, concentration difficulties, mood swings and even substance abuse. These findings suggest that the academic environment can be fertile ground for the development of mental health problems and that stress during medical training can predict future problems, highlighting the need for early interventions. Some institutions already implement stress management programs and support groups, pointing to the importance of integrating these services into the curriculum to protect students' health.

In "*Training of Faculty and Staff in Recognizing Undergraduate Medical Students' Psychological Symptoms and Providing Support: A*

Narrative Literature Review” (S. Constantinou et al., 2022), the authors review the training of faculty to recognize psychological symptoms in medical students, revealing high rates of mental health problems. The research, which includes 167 studies from 47 countries, indicates that around 30% of medical students reported psychological problems and 15% had suicidal ideation. The article also addresses the stigma around seeking help, identified as a significant barrier, and highlights that learning about mental health can help mitigate this barrier. The study also suggests that the clinical years represent a period of greater risk, indicating the need for targeted support during this stage of medical training.

The article “*Barriers to Mental Health Service Utilization Among Medical Students in Saudi Arabia*” (Alsaman et al., 2024) explores the barriers faced by Saudi medical students in accessing mental health services. The authors note that despite mental health awareness, many students avoid seeking help due to factors such as financial concerns, lack of information and cultural norms. These barriers can compromise the mental health of future health professionals and impact the quality of patient care. The study emphasizes the influence of cultural factors, such as religion and social norms, and suggests that understanding these barriers is essential for institutions to develop effective mental health support strategies.

These studies highlight the critical scenario of mental health among medical students and health professionals, reinforcing the importance of a more holistic approach, with structured interventions to promote a healthy and sustainable learning and working environment.

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON MENTAL HEALTH

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in 2020, has brought with it a series of unprecedented challenges, directly affecting the mental health of medical students and healthcare professionals. Social isolation, insecurity about the future, work overload and adapting to new teaching and clinical practice methods exacerbate pre-existing mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and burnout.

INCREASED STRESS AND ANXIETY

The pandemic has forced the adaptation of teaching methods, with the transition to remote and hybrid teaching, which has generated increased stress among medical students. Uncertainties about the academic and professional future, combined with social isolation and the interruption of clinical internships, have made adaptation even more challenging. Studies indicate that the pandemic has contributed to a significant increase in levels of anxiety and depression among medical students. The fear of contagion and the difficulties in dealing with the growing number of infected patients have also affected the mental health of doctors and other health professionals.

BURNOUT IN HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Healthcare workers were on the front line of the fight against COVID-19 and, as a result, suffered physical and emotional work overload. Many faced longer working hours, an intense emotional burden due to the high number of critically ill patients and deaths, as well as the constant fear of contracting the virus and infecting their families. These factors contributed to the development of burnout, a state of emotional, physical and mental exhaustion, characterized by a sense of depersonalization and decreased professional

performance. This phenomenon was particularly significant among doctors and nurses, who often faced issues related to the scarcity of resources and extreme pressure in the work environment.

RELEVANCE OF GLOBAL CRISES FOR MENTAL HEALTH

The pandemic has shown how global crises can amplify pre-existing mental health problems. The impact of a global pandemic goes beyond the immediate stress associated with the increased risk of infection, it also affects social and economic structures, creating a highly uncertain and unstable environment. This contributes to an increase in mental illness in vulnerable populations, such as medical students, who were already under high pressure before the pandemic. The global scenario has brought to light the need for adequate psychological support and mental illness prevention strategies in times of crisis.

SUPPORT MODELS AND EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS

Various models of support and interventions have been shown to be effective in promoting mental well-being among medical students and health professionals. It is essential that educational institutions and work environments integrate strategies that offer psychological support, prevention of mental illness and education on the subject.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT PROGRAMS

The implementation of psychological support programs in educational institutions has been an effective strategy for dealing with mental health challenges among medical students. Many medical schools have started offering free or subsidized psychological counseling, ensuring that students have access to professional help when needed. These

programs are essential for providing support during critical periods, such as during final exams or after high-stress events like intensive clinical internships.

PEER SUPPORT GROUPS

Peer support groups have also proved useful in improving the mental health of medical students. Students in support groups have the opportunity to share their experiences, discuss their challenges and help each other cope with academic pressure. In addition, these groups can be effective in reducing the stigma around mental illness by creating an environment of acceptance and mutual understanding.

MINDFULNESS PROGRAMS AND EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE TRAINING

Another effective intervention is mindfulness programs, which help students and health professionals develop emotional regulation and stress coping skills. Such programs include meditation practices, breathing exercises and other methods to increase self-control and mindfulness. These programs can be particularly effective in preventing burnout and reducing anxiety symptoms.

Emotional resilience training is equally important, as it enables students and health professionals to deal more effectively with the challenges of academic and professional life. These techniques help to build a positive mindset, with a focus on problem-solving and adapting to unexpected changes.

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

It is interesting to note that different countries and institutions have different approaches to mental health promotion. While some medical schools offer highly developed psychological support programs with multidisciplinary teams, others may have more limited resources. Comparing these models can provide insights

into the best practices to be adopted and the gaps that still need to be filled.

PREVENTION AND MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION

Prevention and mental health education are key to reducing the incidence of mental disorders among medical students and health professionals. From the first years of training, it is important that students are educated about the importance of taking care of their mental health, learning to identify early signs of disorders and to seek help when necessary.

EDUCATION IN THE CURRICULUM

Incorporating mental health topics into the medical curriculum can be an effective way of promoting awareness and prevention. This could include classes on how to recognize signs of burnout, how to deal with stress and how to maintain a healthy work-life balance. In addition, raising awareness of the stigma surrounding mental illness can help change the culture within medical schools and, consequently, in the working environment of healthcare professionals.

PROMOTING SELF-AWARENESS

Starting the process of self-awareness early in medical training can help students recognize their own emotional limits and the importance of self-care. Encouraging students to practice self-compassion and to seek psychological support when necessary can help prevent mental health problems from worsening throughout their academic and professional career.

STIGMA REDUCTION

The stigma attached to mental illness is one of the biggest obstacles to students and health professionals seeking help. Educational programs that openly address the issue and demystify mental illness are essential to reducing this stigma. These initiatives can promote a healthier environment, where seeking help is not seen as a sign of weakness, but rather as an act of self-care.

THE MENTAL HEALTH OF TRAINED HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Although many studies and programs focus on medical students, the mental health of trained health professionals is also a significant problem. Doctors, nurses and other professionals often face high levels of stress, anxiety, depression and burnout throughout their careers, which can impact their quality of life, professional performance and, consequently, the quality of patient care.

EFFECTS ON PATIENT CARE

The mental health of healthcare professionals has direct implications for the quality of patient care. Mentally exhausted professionals can make medical errors, have difficulty making quick and accurate decisions and show a lack of empathy with patients. Chronic stress can also lead to a higher incidence of clinical errors, negatively affecting patient outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCE

The impact of mental health on the professional performance of doctors and nurses is profound. Burnout, for example, can reduce a professional's ability to engage effectively with patients, impair the ability to work as part of a team and reduce job satisfaction. As a result, performance and productivity can also be affected.

SUPPORT FOR HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

It is essential that healthcare institutions provide ongoing support for their employees, including psychological support programs, reduced working hours when possible and emotional resilience training. Investing in the mental well-being of doctors and other healthcare professionals is crucial to ensure that they can continue to provide quality care to patients and maintain their mental health throughout their careers.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted by means of a literature review, with the aim of gathering and critically analyzing the information available in the scientific literature on the subject in question. The literature review consists of collecting, selecting and interpreting relevant publications, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the subject under study.

Recognized databases such as PubMed, Scielo, LILACS and Google Scholar were used to search for scientific articles, systematic reviews, clinical guidelines and specialized books. The inclusion criteria involved publications available in Portuguese, English and Spanish, published in the last 10 years, which addressed aspects relevant to the topic. Articles with inadequate methodology, duplicates or which were not directly related to the subject of the study were excluded.

The keywords used in the research were selected based on health descriptors (DeCS/MeSH) and adapted as necessary for the search in different databases. The materials collected were critically analyzed, taking into account the methodological quality of the studies and their contribution to knowledge in the field.

In this way, the literature review enabled a solid theoretical foundation to be built up, allowing for a broad and well-founded approach to the subject under study.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

An analysis of the available literature enabled us to understand the complexity of the subject and its clinical implications, highlighting the importance of a multidisciplinary approach and the continuous updating of health professionals for an accurate diagnosis and appropriate management.

The results of this review show that early identification and appropriate treatment are fundamental to improving patients' quality of life, preventing complications and promoting a better prognosis. It also highlights the need for further research and investigation to deepen knowledge on the subject, as the literature still has gaps that can be filled with future studies.

It is therefore essential to constantly improve clinical guidelines and care protocols, guaranteeing evidence-based practice. Collaboration between different areas of health, investment in technology and the development of educational strategies are essential aspects for the advancement of knowledge and the implementation of more effective measures in the clinical context.

Finally, it is hoped that this study will contribute to broadening the academic and professional debate, stimulating reflection and encouraging new approaches to the subject. Continued research in this area is essential if significant advances are to be made, benefiting both professionals and patients who need more efficient and humanized care.

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