

MENTAL ILLNESS STIGMA IN ROMANIAN SECONDARY HEALTH CARE SERVICES

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Abstract

Background. Stigma involves problems with knowledge (ignorance), attitudes (prejudice) and behavior (discrimination) and has important negative consequences both for patients and families (caregivers): social withdrawal, limited life chances (housing, employment, education) and lower quality of life, poorer individual and family functioning, lower access to medical treatment, with important delays for first consultation, therapeutic approach, therapeutic non-compliance and impairment in recovery.

Aim. We witness a serious increase of incidence and prevalence of psychiatric disorders associated with important medical conditions, leading to an increased burden on patients, often generated by the attitude and perception of mental illness by physicians, other than psychiatrists. On the other hand, even mental health professionals, who have permanent contact with their patients, can exhibit stigma towards people with mental illnesses. We also considered important to assess the changes in physicians' attitude during different stages of medical education (students, residents, medical doctors).

Methods. We selected a convenient sample of health care professionals including 50 nurses, 50 medical students, 50 residents and 50 qualified doctors with minimum two years of clinical experience. Data collections included demographic questionnaire, case vignette questionnaires and attitude against mental illness stigma, assessed by a version of Attribution Questionnaire-27 (AQ-27) adapted from Corrigan PW – 1998. One of the case vignettes referred to a patient with psychotic symptoms, under regular treatment in a psychiatric setting and the other one (control vignette), to a patient with diabetes mellitus. Both patients were hypothetically admitted to the subject's clinic for the management of a common symptom (like stomach ache).

Results. Our study revealed that the attitude of practitioners (doctors and nurses) and trainers (students and residents) was different, depending on education, training in mental health, years of general practice, familiarity with persons with psychiatric disorders, also being influenced by gender.

Conclusion. The results of this study provided valuable information for main stakeholders in the mental health policy field, indicating that there is a need to promote mental health training among practitioners of other specialties, as the presence or even just the suspicion of a mental disorder in a patient has a negative impact in the general hospital setting.

Keywords: stigma, mental illness, general hospital.