

1. Abstract

Objectives: To examine the attitudes of healthcare professionals towards psychiatric patients in a general hospital in Hong Kong and to explore its contributions.

Methods: A survey was carried out on all doctors (including fully qualified doctors and house officers) and nurses working in the various clinical specialties in a regional university teaching hospital in Hong Kong. The questionnaire used was newly devised by a group of experienced psychiatrists and consisted of three parts. The first part served to ascertain the subject's demographics. The second part involved questions aimed to gauge the subject's social exposure, work exposure and negative experience towards psychiatric patients. History of mental illness in families and friends were also documented. The last part involved a case vignette with 19 statements followed exploring the subject's opinions about some common clinical situations they would encounter. Responses were measured on a five points Likert scale. Each subject received a questionnaire with the case vignette depicting a scenario with either a psychiatric patient (case group) or a diabetes mellitus patient (control group) randomly.

Results: A total of 1200 questionnaires were distributed, with equal numbers in the case and the control groups. Total response rate was 36.1%. A case vignette depicting a psychiatric patient was found to have statistical significant contribution in influencing the expression of negative opinions in about two-third of the statements. Increase in social exposure to psychiatric patients led to a decrease in negative attitude towards them whilst

an increase in negative experience with psychiatric patients led to an increase in negative attitude towards them. History of mental illness in families and friends was found to have no contribution to the attitude. An increase in work experience had a general effect of fostering positive communication with patients disregarding the nature of the illnesses.

Conclusion: Stigma towards psychiatric patients existed to a certain degree within the healthcare professionals in the general hospital we investigated. More clinical research is needed in this area to have a more in-depth understanding of the issue so as to prevent the healthcare of psychiatric patients being jeopardised.

Keywords: Stigma, attitude, mental illness, psychiatric patients, healthcare professionals