

# Attitude of Medical Students University of Baghdad towards Psychiatry: Clinical significance and as future career

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## Abstract:

**Background:** Psychiatry is an important branch of medicine and has been an integral part of the academic curriculum in Baghdad College of Medicine since its establishment. Medical students have a different attitude towards it as a medical profession like other specialties of medicine and as future medical career.

**Objectives:** This study aims to explore the attitudes of medical students towards psychiatry in general and as a future career after their course of clerkship in the Department of Psychiatry in Baghdad Teaching Hospital.

**Patients and Methods:** During the year 2016, 158 male and female students of fifth and sixth years participated in a brief five-question survey derived from the international questionnaire-Attitude towards Mental Illness (AMI) assessing their perspectives toward importance of psychiatry as medical discipline to study and as their future career choice.

**Results:** The female to male ratio was 2:1. Of all the respondents, 86.6% indicated the clinical significance of psychiatry as a profession. Only 23% said that they would choose psychiatry as their future career. Nearly half of them attributed improvement of their attitudes to the positive effect of tutoring. Generally, there were no prominent gender differences in the responses

**Conclusion:** The vast majority of the students had a positive attitude towards psychiatry in general yet it wasn't preferred as their future career. It is thought that education and training of psychiatry may ameliorate the negative attitude towards the clinical importance but it may not affect their career aspiration.

**Key words:** Attitude, Psychiatry, Baghdad medical students

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## Introduction:

Psychiatry is an important branch of medicine in medical education and as medical specialty for new trainees, and an indicator for a proper, well developed health services by health policy makers.

As the World Health Organization stated; "There is no health without mental health", (1), therefore both mental health authorities and researchers tried to implement psychiatric education and training in the curriculum of different medical colleges, and to encourage the medical students to choose psychiatry as their future career(2). These two issues were investigated in many developed countries where sizeable literature focused on the issue of the attitudes of medical students towards psychiatry as a profession or towards mentally ill patients since the 1960s (3).The recruitment of trainee psychiatrists also depends on building a positive view of the specialty, so such studies started to expand worldwide to regain the

balance between increasing population and availability of qualified psychiatrists.(4)

Mental disorders are common community problems affecting about 25% of people at some times during their lives (1, 5). Despite the fact that psychiatry was included in curriculum of Iraqi Royal Medical College since 1929 (6) ,it was not a preferable medical specialty by the majority of newly graduates, probably because of the negative attitude towards psychiatry in general leading to the decline in the quality of psychiatric services and the patients' quality of life (7). This shortage was identified in the literature, for example: the ratio of psychiatrist to general population in Asia is 1: 1000000 (5). The situation in Iraq and other Arab countries is not much different (8). This aversion can be attributed to the prejudiced misconception that mental disorders are chronic health problems with poor prognosis with no fruitful treatment, carrying a social stigma, and the impression that psychiatric practice was outside the mainstream of medicine (6, 8). Other reasons may be the conception of psychiatry as a low-status branch with less financial rewards compared to other medical disciplines especially in the developing countries

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(9). A study done in Egypt on fifth-year students from Ain Shams University Medical College on the same subject attributed favorable attitudes to the successful doctor-patient relationship and direct exposure to psychiatric patients during their period of training (10). Education and training in psychiatry in Baghdad College of Medicine is included within the umbrella of the Department of Medicine with 23 theoretical lectures along the fifth academic year, in addition to two weeks of clinical training for scheduled groups in the psychiatric ward inside Baghdad Teaching Hospital.

#### Aims:

This cross-sectional study aimed to explore the attitudes of medical students in Baghdad College of Medicine towards studying psychiatry after completing their training with emphasis on their career perspectives regarding this medical specialty.

#### Methods

During May 2016, 158 medical students of both genders were recruited from the fifth year's students whom have completed their clinical tutoring and sixth years in the College of Medicine/ University of Baghdad. The students were invited to participate in the study after obtaining their oral consent and explaining the nature of the study, they were assured of keeping their identity anonymous. This project was approved by Department of Continuous Medical Education and Faculty of Medicine as part of the research policy implemented by the integrated teaching system. There was no need for formal ethical clearance since no patient's information is disclosed by this study. The questionnaire format included information related to age, gender, stage. The Attitudes towards Mental Illness (AMI) questionnaire was used. It includes 20 questions, covering 8 items and responses are measured by 5-point Likert scale with a higher score suggesting more positive attitudes. A score of 60 represents a neutral score (11). The scoring on some of the items is reversed to avoid response bias. These items assess the attitudes to:

- 1- Psychiatric patients
- 2- Psychiatric illness
- 3- Psychiatrists
- 4- Choosing psychiatry as future career
- 5- Psychiatric drugs
- 6- Seeking help from psychiatrists only
- 7- Psychiatric hospitals
- 8- Psychiatric tutoring and clinical training.

These eight items were grouped together into five selected questions and were included in this study questionnaire with three scored responses: (1= agree, 2= uncertain and 3= disagree). The briefing of original questionnaire was in the same direction to generalize the main goals of this study and allow less time for data sampling.

These questions seek to identify the attitude towards:

1. Studying psychiatry as an important branch of medicine
2. Seeking medical help from psychiatrists
3. Encouraging factors for adopting positive attitudes towards psychiatry as profession
4. Choosing psychiatry as a future career
5. Whether any changes of their attitude towards psychiatry to be a more positive one after receiving psychiatric tutoring.

**Statistical analysis:** The data was managed using SPSS program version 21.

#### Results:

The response rate was 100%. The average age was 22.8 years. Of the total number of students enrolled in the study 105 (66.5%) were females and 53 (33.5%) were males. Fifth year students were 63 (39.9%), while sixth year students were 95 (60.1%).

On

As for the AMI questionnaire, following are the results:

1. 137 respondents (86.86%) agree with the question "Psychiatry is an important branch of medicine that should be studied", while 20 (12.74%) of them responded with uncertain .figure -1
2. 127 respondents(80.29%) disagree with the question that " seeking help from psychiatrists is rarely helpful" while 7(4.41%)responded(agree), 24(15.3%) were ,uncertain) as shown in figure- 2. 3100 respondents (63.06) agree with the third question " no efforts were made to encourage me towards more positive attitudes" while 28 (17.83%) disagree and 30 (19.11%) were uncertain as shown in figure-3.
- 4 67 respondents (42.04) disagree with the fourth question asking whether" I will choose psychiatry as my future career" while 34( 23.1%) agree and57 (34.6%)were uncertain as shown in figure-4.
- 5The responses to the 5<sup>th</sup> question" My attitude towards psychiatry improved after the theoretical &clinical training"were 75 (48.9%) agree, 55 (28.5%) uncertain, and 28 (22.6%) disagree.

Responses according to gender were generally comparable. However, the percentage of female students who agreed about improving their attitudes after psychiatric tutoring was higher than their male colleagues, as shown in Table-1.

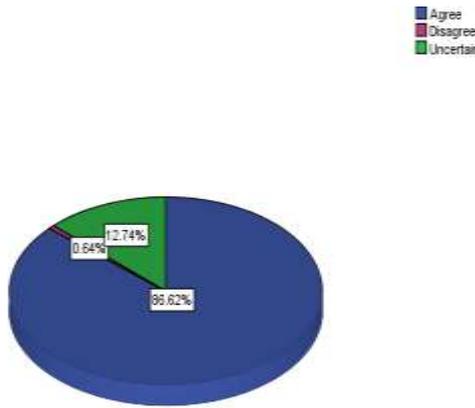


Figure-1 psychiatry is an important branch of medicine that should be studied

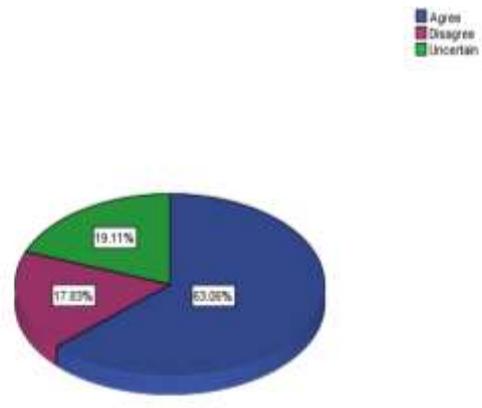


Figure- 3: No efforts were to encourage promotion of attitude

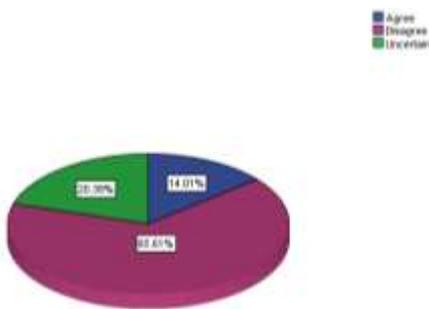


Figure-2 Seeking help from psychiatrists is rarely beneficial

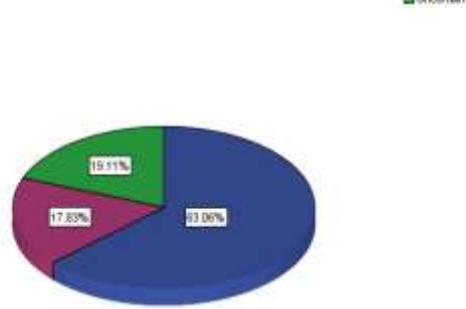


Figure- 4: Choosing psychiatry as future career

Table 1. The student's responses according the gender:

questions	Male%((N = 53)			Female%(N = 105)		
	agree	uncertain	disagree	agree	uncertain	disagree
1-Psychiatry is an important branch of medicine that should be studied	86.6	15.4	00	87.5	11.5	1
2-seeking help from psychiatrists is rarely helpful	15.4	25	59.6	12.5	18.3	69.2
3-No efforts were made to encourage promotion of positive attitudes	63.5	19.2	17.3	62.6	19.2	18.3
4-I will choose psychiatry as my future career	23.1	34.6	42.3	20.1	46.2	33.7
5-My attitude towards psychiatry improved after the theoretical and clinical training	48.9	28.5	22.6	67.7	18.2	14.1

**Discussion:**

Attitudes towards psychiatry as part of medical education or as medical specialty and towards mental illnesses, has been stigmatized and targeted by negative judgments and misunderstanding for a

long time (12). There is much to be done to provide an empirical basis for evidence-based interventions to improve the negative attitudes towards psychiatry. However, a considerable progress was accomplished during the last two decades (13). Health authorities in Iraq like other developing countries, strive to

expand psychiatric services to the public and develop the academic education and training in psychiatry (8, 14). The strong negative impressions about psychiatry lead the young health professionals to refrain from specializing in psychiatry resulting in shortages of manpower in the field of mental health (15). In this study, a convenient sample of medical students fully responded to the brief questionnaire because the non-consenting students were not approached to start with. Those who participated expressed enthusiasm for the study objectives. Average age was expected being a homogenous sample, the predominance of females was observed in the recent years in consistency with similar previous studies (16). However it needs a longitudinal data to analyze female/male ratios. All the students were singles which was expected being financially dependent on their families and prioritized the graduation and training over marriage plans. The vast majority of students (86.6%) perceive psychiatry as an important branch of medicine, which may be attributed to the good quality of teaching by the staff in the Department and the positive impact of the mentoring process. This is consistent with the results of Angermeyer and Dietrich in their meta-analysis study (9) as well as with similar studies in other parts of the world (4, 7, 17, 18). Two third of the students regarded psychiatrists as the main source for seeking help and treatment which is promoting the medical concept of psychiatric treatment and discouraging other kinds of therapy like traditional healers, social and family remedies. This positive attitude towards psychiatric management may reflect the increased awareness about psychiatric disorders and management of mentally ill patients by direct exposure to patients during their clinical course in the psychiatric ward (19, 20). Nearly 63% of respondents expressed presence of obstacles in the profession that discouraging them from perceiving psychiatry as an ambitious career and that psychiatry is still a stigmatized medical specialty with little or no efforts done to address this negative stereotyped misconception held at the level of society, media, families and among their peers in other branches of medicine (21). Although the majority of the students refrained from choosing psychiatry as future career, its preference by one fifth of them can be considered as indicator of positive attitude or at least a promising outcome keeping in mind the negative outlook to psychiatry and psychiatrist. This finding is consistent with some previous studies (22). Despite the relatively short period of two weeks of clinical tutoring, more than half of the students confirmed an improvement of their pre-training attitudes to become more positive due to the effect of acquisition of theoretical knowledge and bedside experience. This was also found by many authors in developed and developing countries within standards of medical educations (6, 21, 22). Both genders agreed equally on the main issues of the study except that the percentage of females who were

convinced that consulting psychiatrists is the only proper way to help mentally ill patients and chose psychiatry as future career exceeded that of their male colleagues. This may be a mere statistical methodology or it may points to the fact that males have more worries and psychological burden than females in general because of their need to fulfill their medical career and future financial burden considering psychiatry in Iraq is not a very rewarding on the financial level (23).

#### Conclusions:

This cross-sectional study examined how medical students in Baghdad College of Medicine perceived the importance of psychiatry as an academic and clinical discipline and future medical specialty. Most of the studied sample showed positive attitudes towards psychiatry as assessed in the survey which can be attributed to the competent education and training after completing their periods of clerkship. The preference to specialty of psychiatry is encouraging finding and has to be re-assessed in a large scaled studies. The authors call for increasing hours of undergraduate training and readjusting the curriculum which will encourage recruiting more numbers of trainees to this important medical profession to help solving the imbalance between number of psychiatrists and public demands and the current situation of mental health in Iraq.

#### Authors' contributions:

Both authors participated equally in study conception, design, data collection ,interpretation of findings, manuscript drafting and critical review.

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## موقف طلبة كلية طب جامعة بغداد تجاه الطب النفسي : الأهمية السريرية وكتخصص مهني مستقبلاً

أ.د مها سليمان يونس كلية الطب-جامعة بغداد  
د. عباس فاضل مهدي الربيعي مستشفى بغداد التعليمي

### الخلاصة

**خلفية الدراسة:** يعتبر الطب النفسي أحد فروع الطب المهمة ومادة اساسية ضمن المنهاج التدريسي لكلية طب -جامعة بغداد منذ تأسيسها .  
**هدف الدراسة:** تهدف هذه الدراسة الى إستطلاع موقف طلبة الكلية تجاه الطب النفسي كممارسة مهنية وتخصص أكاديمي بعد إنهاءهم مقررات التعليم والتدريب في قسم الأمراض النفسية في مستشفى بغداد التعليمي .  
**طرق الدراسة :** خلال العام 2016 ,أنتظم 158 طالب وطالبة من كلية الطب جامعة بغداد طوعياً للمشاركة في الاستبيان ذو الخمسة أسئلة باجوبه مقننة والمختصر من الاستبيان العالمي-الموقف من الأمراض النفسية- الخاص بقياس الموقف من الطب النفسي كتخصص طبي ضروري للمجتمع وكدراسة أكاديمية بالاضافة الى مدى رغبتهم بالعمل كاختصاصيين طب نفسي مستقبلاً.  
**النتائج :** فاق عدد الاناث أقرانهم الذكور بنسبة 1/2 . 86.6% من الطلاب المشاركين أكدوا أهمية الطب النفسي علمياً وسريرياً 23% فقط أبدوا رغبتهم في اختيار الطب النفسي كتخصص مستقبلي ,أشار نصف المشاركين الى تحسن موقفهم تجاه الطب النفسي بشكل أكثر إيجابيه بعد إنهاءهم المقرر الأكاديمي لمادة الطب النفسي نظرياً وعملياً. لم توجد فروق بارزة في الاستجابة للاستبيان بين الذكور والاناث.  
**الاستنتاج :** أظهرت هذه الدراسة الى التوجه الايجابي للاغلبية الساحقة من العينة المدروسة نحو الطب النفسي بشكل عام لكنه لم يكن الخيار المفضل للتخصص المهني مستقبلاً قد يكون للأفكار النمطية السلبية حول مهنة الطب النفسي دوراً في العزوف عن المهنة وهذه الصورة السلبية قابلة للتحسن والتغيير بتأثير التعليم النظري و التدريب السريري الكفوء خلال فترة الدراسة كما أشارت نتائج الدراسة  
**الكلمات المفتاحية :** موقف , الطب النفسي , طلبة كلية طب بغداد.