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Medical Student Balint – a Tool to Improve Empathy, Transform Communication Skills and Empower Tomorrow's Socially Aware Patients' Advocates

Dr Justyna Wroblewska, Dr Burak Cardak and
Dr Michael Milmore

RDASH, Sheffield, United Kingdom

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Aims: A trial of Balint Group for eleven medical students during their psychiatry placement in Rotherham, UK, to add to the existing pool of evidence regarding the impact of Balint Group on empathy, communication skills, understanding of doctor-patient interaction and to improve the understanding of the wider socio-political context of patients, with the hope of developing agency, consultation abilities, advocacy and well-being among future doctors.

Methods: Balint Groups were facilitated by two Psychiatry Core Trainees with weekly supervision by a consultant medical psychotherapist. Five sessions were integrated into the students' weekly timetable. The students were sent questionnaires before and after the pilot, asking for views on the role of psychological factors in the doctor-patient interaction as well as Balint Groups. There were seven closed questions in both questionnaires and an extra two open questions in the ending questionnaire.

Results: Three students attended all sessions, with others having inconsistent attendance, resulting in six to ten students in each session. With each subsequent session, the students displayed more openness and reflection during discussions. Ten students answered the initial questionnaire and nine the ending questionnaire. Therapeutic relationships were discussed in the context of wider issues, such as abortion, homophobia, migration and racism, menopause, and prejudice from healthcare professionals towards patients from lower socio-economic backgrounds. In answers to the open questions, the students highlighted the beneficial effects of the sessions on their subjective levels of empathy, better understanding of psychosocial factors involved in patients' presentation, benefits of reflection to help resolve internal conflicts, reduce burnout and create solidarity between students. However, there was no significant change in the answers to the closed questions. This could be a result of inconsistent attendance, short duration of trial and ambiguity of questions. The students were, on average, already highly aware of the role psychological factors play in patients' presentation and had some awareness of the role of doctors' attitudes towards patients, which could have contributed to this also. Both trainees found their own benefits facilitating the sessions; improving their leadership, organisation and psychotherapy skills.

Conclusion: This five-week Balint Group pilot produced benefits described by the medical students as improved empathy, psychosocial awareness, reflective practice, reducing burnout and improving peer to peer bonds. The pilot also demonstrated the role of Balint Groups as an educational tool to enhance sociopolitical understanding; empowering doctors as advocates and addressing harmful biases that can otherwise persist in healthcare settings.

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A Systematic Review on the Impact of Mental Health First Aid in Medical, Nursing and Allied Healthcare Professional Students

Dr Su Ying Yeoh¹, Dr Joanne Rodda^{1,2}, Dr Sharna Bennett^{1,2} and
Dr Helen Bintley²

¹Kent and Medway NHS and Social Care Partnership Trust, Kent, United Kingdom and ²Kent and Medway Medical School, Canterbury, United Kingdom

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Aims: The unique demands of studying for a healthcare-related degree are associated with an increased risk of developing mental health problems. Stigma and fear of repercussions for their future careers may be a barrier to these students seeking professional help. Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) is a globally disseminated psycho-education course, training members of the public to recognise and respond to people experiencing mental health problems in their communities. Training healthcare professional (HCP) students in MHFA may help them support their peers and optimise their own wellbeing.

We aimed to review the literature regarding experiences of MHFA in medical, nursing and allied HCP students and its impact on mental health knowledge, confidence and skills in supporting others, stigmatising attitudes, self-care, peer support and student wellbeing.

Methods: This systematic review was conducted in accordance with PRISMA guidelines and registered on PROSPERO (ID: CRD42024589509). Electronic databases (Ovid, Medline, PsycINFO, CINAHL and ERIC) were searched on 9/10/2024 for primary studies evaluating the impact of MHFA in HCP students. Data was extracted independently by two authors. Study quality was assessed using the MMERSQI (Modified Medical Education Research Study Quality Instrument) and Cochrane Risk of Bias tool.

Results: Searches identified 1613 studies, 25 of which met inclusion criteria. Study types were heterogeneous, including four randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and four qualitative studies. Eight studies reported that MHFA significantly improved post-test knowledge and mental health literacy. Fourteen studies reported enhanced confidence in providing MHFA post-training. Three studies described outcomes based on performance on simulation assessments, and eight studies reported reduction in discriminatory attitudes following MHFA training. Data on peer support and student wellbeing was limited. Qualitative studies suggested that MHFA clarified misconceptions around mental illness, facilitated supporting friends and family, and helped with self-care and seeking professional support for their own mental health. Student pharmacists felt that skills gained from MHFA were particularly advantageous in their professional roles. Qualitative data also suggested that tailored content for HCP students and increased pace of delivery would be beneficial.

Conclusion: The evidence base on this topic is limited, with many small studies and few RCTs. However, the available literature suggests that MHFA may be a promising strategy to improve mental health literacy, confidence, skills, and reduce stigma in HCP students. Findings suggest that there is demand for bespoke MHFA courses for HCP students, which may fulfil an unmet need in facilitating them to provide support to their peers, and optimise their own wellbeing.

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