

Original Article

Assessing The Physical And Psychological Well-Being Of Palestinian Medical Students Arriving At Rawalpindi Medical University

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Abstract

Objective: To assess the physical and psychological well-being of Palestinian medical students carried out at Rawalpindi Medical University.

Methods: A cross-sectional descriptive survey was carried out to analyse the physical and psychological health of Palestinian medical students who arrived at Rawalpindi Medical University in a desperate scenario. Apart from measuring vitals, Ophthalmic and ENT examinations of medical students were also done. Their comorbidities were also inquired, and influenza and typhoid vaccines were administered. Depression among students was categorised by using the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) scale. Data was analysed by using Microsoft Excel 2016 software. Descriptive statistics were applied.

Results: Of the 36 Palestinian medical students reaching RMU for continuation of medical education, 19 were males. The mean age of the students was 22.4 ± 1.45 years. Around 29 students were subjected to a physical and psychological health assessment. They were physically fit and healthy. 11 students were mildly depressed, and female students were comparatively more depressed than males.

Conclusion: The medical students of Gaza were physically fit but depressed due to the disaster in their homeland.

Keywords: physical health, psychological well-being, depression.

Introduction

The Israeli Palestinian conflict led to massive, devastating effects. Unrivalled bombardment in Gaza and its neighbouring regions led to more than 100,000 casualties and the displacement of approximately 2.3 million people.¹ Where the environment was massively destroyed by extraordinary shelling and attacks, how could the well-being of humans escape this dreadful violence? People died either due to bombing or due to lack of food, water and other necessities of life.²

Illicit airstrikes and the demolition of enormous residential areas, infrastructure, sanitation and healthcare facilities caused succumbing to starvation.³ Gaza Strip has been subjected to persistent violent attacks with immense fatalities.⁴ Most of the people confronted with unusual situations or disasters during these attacks were likely to develop anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.⁵ One out of the five people residing in conflict-affected regions had probability of coming forth with numerous mental health issues.⁶ The women and children are highly vulnerable to such disorders.⁷

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has reported substantial deterioration of mental health among inhabitants of Gaza due to violence, massive deaths and displacements. All these emphasise the need for moral support and care in addition to international aid and emergency response.⁸ Although there are multiple barriers to rehabilitation of war-afflicted communities,⁹ yet prompt mental health support of the victims is of paramount significance for sustaining their lives afterwards.¹⁰ In distressing circumstances, where healthcare facilities are overwhelmed with casualties and humans are succumbing to interregional conflict, access to mental healthcare and psychological support becomes unachievable.¹¹ According to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), more than a million Palestinian children are in dire need of mental health services due to their higher vulnerability to depression and anxiety.¹²

In the wake of the heartbreaking scenario of Palestine, the higher authorities of Pakistan took a benevolent step to support the medical students of Gaza.¹³ Rawalpindi Medical University of Pakistan also moved forward in facilitating and catering for the distressing Palestinian medical students for the continuation of their medical education.¹⁴ The Prime Minister of Pakistan directed the concerned authorities to ensure completion of Palestinian medical students in fully funded programs.¹⁵ On arrival at RMU, these students were subjected to a complete physical and mental

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MR-Conception, Design
OA, MQ- Acquisition, Analysis, Interpretation
RS-Drafting
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health examination following a warm welcome and orientation session. This was meant to deliver essential assistance or healthcare services to the medical students as they have moved to a culturally different region, and their adjustment also demands moral and psychological support. This phase was also intended to familiarise them with various healthcare facilities in teaching hospitals affiliated with Rawalpindi Medical University.

Materials And Methods

A cross-sectional descriptive study was done to assess the physical and psychological well-being of 36 Palestinian medical students arriving at RMU, but 29 among them underwent physical and psychological health evaluation. Apart from determining their vital signs, ophthalmic and ENT examination was also carried out. They were also interviewed for any comorbidities and vaccination status. The Patient Health Questionnaire scale (PHQ-9) was used to measure the psychological well-being of the medical students who reached RMU from Al-Azhar University. This tool has been verified as having excellent internal consistency and good convergent validity. The criteria for categorising mental health by this scale,¹⁶ are illustrated below in Table 1.

Table 1: PHQ-9 scale criteria for classifying mental well-being

PHQ-9 Score	Depression Severity
0-4	Non-Minimal
5-9	Mild
10-14	Moderate
15-19	Moderately Severe
20-27	Severe

Data was analysed by using Microsoft Excel 2016 software. Descriptive statistics were applied.

Results

Of the 44 medical students of Al-Azhar University who were intended to come to RMU for continuation of the medical studies, 36 were able to reach and enrol, and 19 of them were males. The mean age of the students was 22.4 ± 1.45 years. Most (69.4%) of them were 22 years old, as depicted below in Figure 1. The parents of 17 students were residents of Gaza, while those of 12 and 2 were living in Egypt and Canada, respectively. The students were subjected to a physical health assessment by analysing their vitals, comorbidities, vaccination status, and visual and ENT disorders. Of the 36 medical students, 29 and 27 had a history of influenza and typhoid vaccination, respectively. On examining their physical health, most of them were physically fit with vitals within normal range and no diagnosed ENT or ophthalmic deformity. However, only 2 male students had a past medical history of asthma, and one female student was identified with Polycystic Ovaries (PCOs) and another one with Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD). One male and one female student had a past surgical history of visual lens replacement. Their psychological well-being was measured by using the PHQ-9 scale. Of the 29 students assessed for psychological health, one student was normal, and 11 had mild depression as presented below in Figure 2.

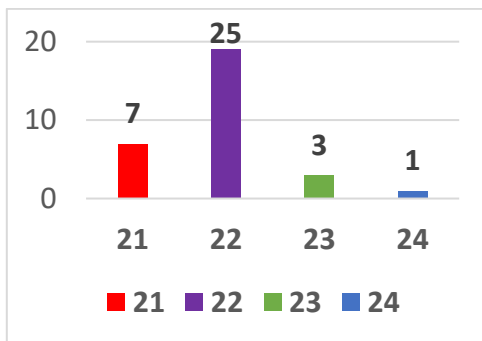


Figure 1: Age of medical students of Gaza

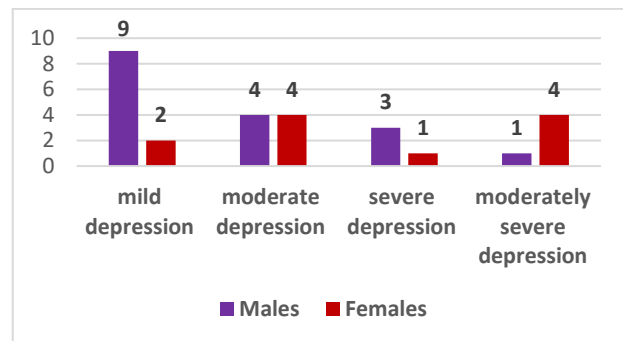


Figure 2: Psychological well-being of Palestinian medical students

Discussion

Of the 36 medical students from Gaza reaching RMU for continuation of studies, 19 were males. Their mean age was 22.4 ± 1.45 years. The Government of Pakistan was quite generous to facilitate these students in continuation of medical and dental education


by bestowing moral, social and financial support.¹⁷ The main objective of the physical health analysis of these students was to deliver optimum healthcare and services to them, as they had come from a conflict-hit region of the world. Palestine has been subjected to an unbearable humanitarian disaster with approximately 70% expiries among women and children.¹⁸ According to WHO, approximately 355,000 children were administered polio vaccination in Central and Southern Gaza.¹⁹ Vaccination of the disaster-affected communities is of paramount significance to minimise the spread of infectious diseases like typhoid and cholera.²⁰ Gaza medical students enrolling at RMU for continuation of education were also subjected to typhoid and influenza vaccines. The health of these students was the top priority for the definite attainment of the learning outcomes that were mentioned in their purpose-built curriculum. Mental health is an essential element of health. WHO defines health as “a state of composite physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being”. Mental well-being is over and above the absence of mental ailments.²¹ On psychological well-being assessment of Ghaza medical students in the current study, only 1 was found free of depression, while 11 were categorised as mildly depressed. Around 8 and 4 students were diagnosed with moderate and severe depression, respectively, as depicted in Figure 2. Depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorders have been recognised as the principal mental ailments prevailing among conflict-affected regions of the globe.²² A cross-sectional survey by Aldabbour B et al among medical students of the Gaza Strip following Israeli bombardment revealed that 63.4% of them were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.²³ According to another cross-sectional study among Palestinian medical students, 16.7% of them suffered personally from a mental disorder, and only 5.7% of them consulted a psychiatrist for mental illness. About 42.6% of these students also communicated with mentally ill people.²⁴ The rising prevalence of mental illnesses among inhabitants of Gaza was attributed to numerous factors like disruption of healthcare facilities, damage to buildings, lack of food and safe drinking water. Moreover, lack of adequate media coverage also seemed to be the main obstacle in the provision of basic life necessities to the victims.²⁵ The stringent efforts of the WHO in addressing the mental health issues of war-afflicted regions of Palestine cannot be underestimated. It made available the valuable resources to train the healthcare workforce to support the helpless and victimised individuals.²⁶ The targeted interpositions and holistic analysis of the mentally sick population, including medical students, can prove beneficial in enhancing the morale and mental health of the war-afflicted population and hence mitigate the frequency of mental disorders.

Conclusions

The Palestinian medical students are mentally depressed due to the conflict that led to the demolition of their native land. One-on-one counselling and psychological support can help a great deal to mitigate depression among students.

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