

Health Seeking Behavior among Medical Students in the University of Sharjah

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Abstract: Background: Medical students have different perception of symptoms and illness. Moreover, medical students report barriers to seeking help about their health, and are more likely to seek advice informally from friends and/or family. It is important to identify health seeking behaviors among medical students to be able to modify and interfere accordingly. Objectives: To describe the health seeking behavior of medical students in UOS and identify the factors affecting those behaviors. Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted at the University of Sharjah during the spring semester of the academic year 2012-2013. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to all medical students from all 5 years. Questions were related to physical health seeking behaviors only. Data was analyzed using the SPSS21 software. Results: We have found that self-prescription was the most common practiced health seeking behavior among 91.8%-96.6% of UOS medical students (CI of 95%) followed by the order ignoring a health problem, seeking immediate care, using the internet, reading more about the problem and self diagnosis & management. All are practiced by more than 50% of the students. A set of other behaviors was identified as well. Factors affecting these behaviors mainly included: self-care orientation & medical education. Other factors that had a role as well were: gender, stage of studying, having a chronic illness and lack of knowledge about the health services available. Conclusions: Medical students in the University of Sharjah have a high level of self-care orientation and accordingly, tend to react to their illness in a variety of ways. The most common of these is self-prescription. Studying medicine is the 2nd major factor that influences their health seeking behaviors. Sufficient guidance about the consequences associated with certain behaviors may be required.

Key words: Health seeking behavior, self-prescription, self-diagnosis.

1. Introduction

Medical students have different perception of symptoms and illness. Self-diagnosis and self-treatment are common behavior among medical students [1]. In addition, this attitude of students during medical school will contribute to future doctors not seeking medical advice. Little qualitative research has been conducted to study the health seeking behavioral practice among medical students and medical doctors as well. However, some studies showed that there is evidence of self-treatment and unwillingness to consult GPs, starting by the time when individuals become junior doctors. [2]. Medical students report barriers to seeking help about their health, and are more likely to seek advice informally from friends, family member

and senior colleague, especially with regard to mental health care [3].

Our study aimed to: (1) study and analyze the health seeking behavior of medical students; (2) determine the prevalence of self-diagnosis and self-treatment behavior among medical students in University of Sharjah; (3) identify the factors influencing medical student behavior. It is important to identify the health seeking behavior among medical students to be able to amend and interfere accordingly.

2. Materials and Methods

A cross-sectional study was conducted among medical students during the research program at the University of Sharjah of the academic year 2012-2013. Students from pre-clinical ($n = 152$) and clinical year ($n = 209$) were included in the study. A questionnaire was developed to study students' health seeking

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behavior and factors influencing this behavioral. It also included questions to address personal details like age, gender and parents' education level.

The self-administered questionnaires were distributed to all medical students during lectures, breaks, and workshops. Data was entered and analyzed using the SPSS21 statistical software. Demographic data were analyzed using Pearson Chi-Squared and *t*-tests. Significance (*p* value) was determined at the 5% level.

3. Results

Our sample size was 361 students. The response rate was 74% overall. Females and males represent 63.6% & 36.4% of the sample, respectively. 69.4% were in their pre-clinical phase, while 30.6% were in their clinical phase. Self-prescription is the most common health seeking behaviors reported by medical students in case of illness 95.80% (Fig. 1). 87.40% of students reported problem ignorance as they believed that it is self-limiting diseases based on their knowledge. Results showed that self- diagnosis and treatment is higher in males than females (86% to 65% respectively). 34% of participants have a family

member in the medical field. Only 24.80% of students had regular check-ups and consult general practitioners.

Fig. 1 shows the health seeking behavior among the student sample:

The most common drugs self-prescribed are analgesics and antibiotics (31% and 19% respectively). Fig. 2 shows the percentage of drug prescribed.

Students reported that medical education, excessive waiting time to be seen, cost and inaccessible medical services are the most common reasons that affect their behavior in sickness.

4. Discussion

Among many people, certain behaviors came to our attention as they are practiced by more than half of our population. Self-prescription was the most common health seeking behavior and we think that it is mostly attributed to the degree of self-care orientation of the students with self-care orientation becoming an increasing awareness of an existing health problem & an increasing need to do something about it. This finding was in concordance with a similar study of Isacson and Bingefors [4]. Also, medical knowledge

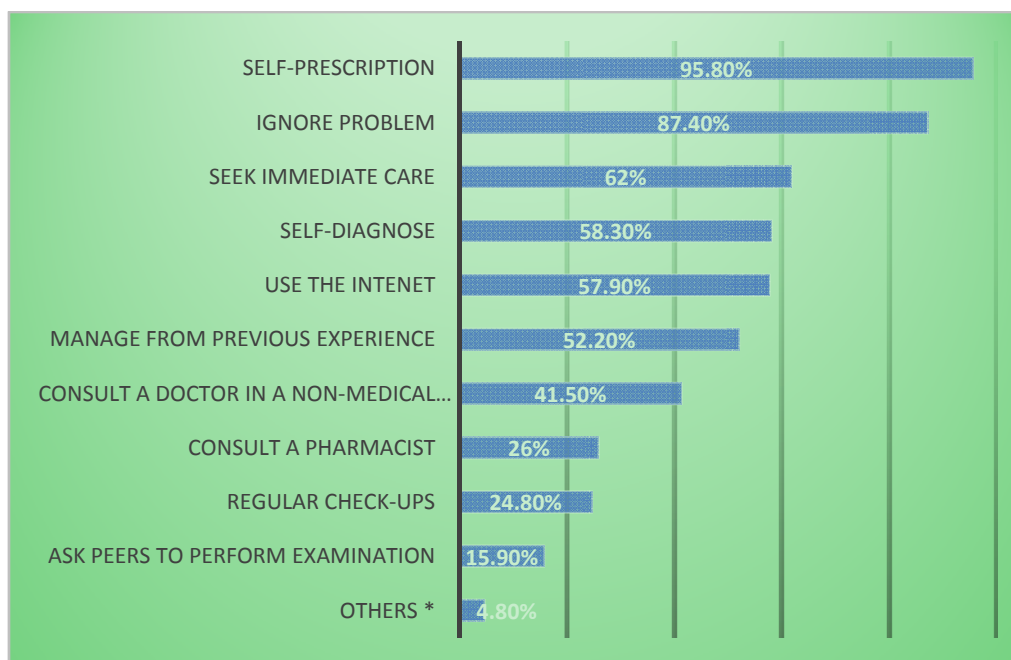


Fig. 1 Health seeking behavior among medical students at University of Sharjah.

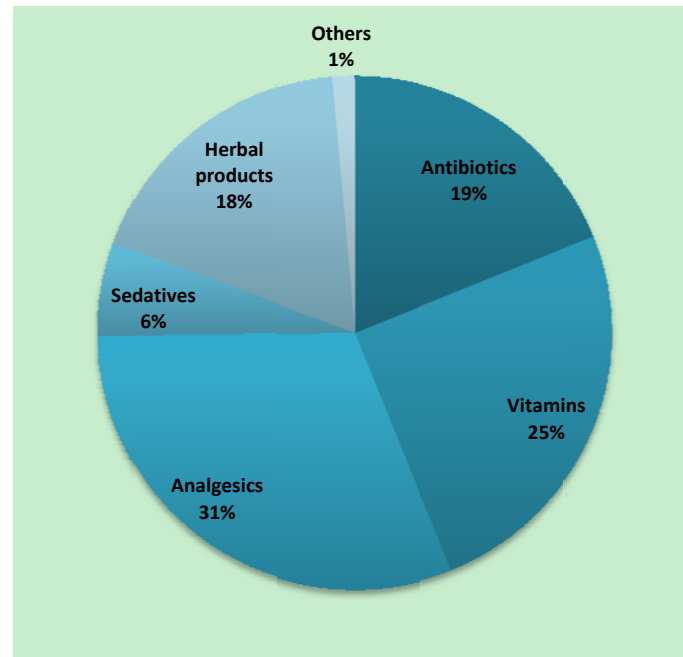


Fig. 2 Self-prescribed medicine.

plays a major role in self-diagnosis behavior, as the medical students know the signs and symptoms of the different diseases, and they can evaluate whether they need care or not. Majority of the students, however, still have a high tendency to ignore a health problem. The reason behind this behavior could be a result of self-evaluation of the problem. For instance, seeking immediate care would be mostly to relief symptoms & early diagnosis [5, 6].

There is an undeniable impact of medical education on the actions of medical students in our study, as the majority of students had declared. We really believe that the sense of self-care orientation explains the variety of behaviors found.

5. Conclusions

Medical Students in the University of Sharjah have a high level of self-care orientation and accordingly, tend to react to their illness in a variety of ways. The most common of these is self-prescription. Results of our study showed few concerning behavior among medical students at University of Sharjah and proof that self-diagnosis behavior among physicians' starts early from the medical college.

Multiple factors play a role in student's health seeking behavior. Studying Medicine is the major factor that influences their health seeking behaviors. This was a double-edged factor that either pushed the student to seek-immediate care or ignored the health problem, taking into account other factors like gender, knowledge about the health services available, phase of studying, and amount of knowledge the students have.

Previous studies showed that having family member in the medical field is a major factor influencing health seeking behavior among students [7], and our study showed no significant correlation between this factor and student's behavior.

At any rate, sufficient guidance about the consequences associated with certain behaviors may be required. We believe that increasing awareness among medical students regarding their health and the need for seeking expert medical advice is necessary to improve health and quality of care.

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