

Schizophrenia stigma among medical and nursing undergraduates

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Negative attitudes toward schizophrenia are associated with difficulty of integration of those suffering from this mental illness into the community. The program “Open the doors” (World Psychiatric Association, <http://www.openthedoors.com>) has detected in Spain that stigma was experienced by those who have contact with the illness (patients, family and professionals), while the general population showed little rejection. Other studies have found in the UK that the general population commonly perceived people with schizophrenia as dangerous [1], while in Canada [2], it was those of the general population with a greater knowledge of schizophrenia who tended to have less-distancing attitudes. To our knowledge, there are no data about schizophrenia stigma in health care undergraduates. Therefore, the present study was aimed at exploring the knowledge and perceptions toward schizophrenia in this population with a potential influence on schizophrenia stigma.

A total of 274 students of medicine and 70 students of nursing (18–24 years old) from the University of Extremadura (Spain) were surveyed during 2000 about their general knowledge of schizophrenia. They reported to have high awareness of the mental illness, its onset, associated risk factors, manifestations and treatment, with no significant differences between the both groups, medical and nursing undergraduates. How-

ever, they thought that people with schizophrenia never recover (50%), considered that they were or could be dangerous or violent (78%), and rejected or were ambivalent about whether to accept them in a social situation (40%). In addition, they did not feel they had enough information about schizophrenia (95%) and they did not know someone with this disorder (75%).

The present findings suggest that medical and nursing undergraduates have ambivalent or discriminatory attitudes toward the recovery, level of violence or dangerousness, and social management of people with schizophrenia. Paradoxically, these results contrast with the fact that the students seem to be knowledgeable about the nature of schizophrenia, even so they do not perceive themselves to have enough information. This could be explained by the evidence that knowledge of the symptoms associated with the acute phase of schizophrenia creates more stigma than the label of schizophrenia alone; on the contrary, knowledge about the aftercare settings may reduce it [3]. A second explanation for the present findings might lie in the absence of social contact with people suffering the disorder. In this sense, it has been reported that those people with previous contact with individuals with a mental illness were more likely to perceive them as less dangerous than people without previous contact [4].

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The present data suggest that schizophrenia stigma is present among medical and nursing undergraduates. The perception of insufficient knowledge about the mental illness and the lack of contact with rehabilitated patients might be major reasons for it. Concerning the relevance of the present findings, a need is suggested for reviewing the information given to the health care undergraduates, by including more content about the increasing quality of life and good social functioning of people with schizophrenia under effective treatment and social facilities. In addition, it is proposed that not only contact with inpatients or outpatients but also with those who have recovered from schizophrenia would be beneficial. Therefore, the development is suggested of an specific preventative anti-stigma programme for students of health care professions in order to create positive attitudes regarding the social and clinical management of the mental illness during the academic training.

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