PS228

Is more stressful to become a physician or a pharmacist? A study on medical and pharmacy students’ psychological state

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Aim: The objective of this study was to evaluate stress, anxiety, depression and happiness in medical and pharmacy students and to explore similarities and differences between them.

Introduction: Higher levels of depression, anxiety and stress have been found in medical and pharmacy students when compared to general population, varying across year in school and gender. Well-being during school years conversely may decrease depressive symptoms, boost happiness and life satisfaction, and contributes to resilience to stressful academic experiences. Students' awareness of symptoms and consequences of distress may foster the search for psychoeducation and psychotherapy which offer effective strategies to improve mental health and academic performance.

Methods: A cross-sectional study included 420 students of Faculty of Medicine of the University of Porto (FMUP) and 200 students of Faculty of Pharmacy of the University of Porto (FFUP). Assessment included sociodemographic characterization, screening for anxiety and depressive symptoms - Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS), stress - Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) and subjective wellbeing - Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS). One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and the independent paired t-test were applied to compare demographic and psychological characteristics from within each group.

Results: Statistically significantly higher number of anxiety and depressive symptoms were found in medical students (p < 0.001), and pharmacy students presented significantly higher PSS scores (p < 0.001). Interestingly, medical students showed statistically significantly higher SHS scores than pharmacy students. Female students revealed significantly higher levels of anxiety, depression and stress in pharmacy school, but in medical school female students presented uniquely higher stress levels.

Conclusion: Attending a faculty degree is a challenging experience which involves life changing experiences and poses different personal and academic problems according each specific school. These findings demonstrate the need to better understand the balance between students' stressful experiences and happiness to identify students at risk in both schools.

References