

HARASSMENT OF NEW ENTRANTS TO DENTAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES BY SENIOR STUDENTS IN THE UNIVERSITY OF PERADENIYA

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Introduction

Commencing life as a university undergraduate involves facing many challenges in the fields of education, interpersonal encounters and societal obligations. Added to these are the reported traumatic events that the senior students inflict upon the new entrants during the first few months of undergraduate life. Studies on dental students have revealed that psychological mistreatment of new entrants was more frequent than physical mistreatment, with classmates and clinical faculty being the most common sources of maltreatment. Substantial proportions of dental students had experienced sexual harassment (Wolf et al., 1992), with female students reporting such incidents more frequently than the males (Webster et al., 1999). The widely different backgrounds from which students come for undergraduate studies in Sri Lanka has been suggested as a factor that allows groups of students to 'initiate' the new students, especially the young women, using cruel and indecent acts of 'ragging' (Mathews, 1995).

The aims of the study were to ascertain:

- i. The extent of perceived mistreatment experienced by dental students starting their undergraduate education;
- ii. Measures taken by the students when they experienced harassment in dental school.
- iii. Negative effects of the abuse on the students' behaviours and attitudes;
- iv. Categories of persons inflicting mistreatment on the students;

Materials and Methods

The survey instrument designed by Moscarello et al. (1994) was used in the investigation after being modified to suit the local situation and the English language ability of the Year 2008 batch of dental students. The questionnaire was pre-tested with ten students from this group. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research and Ethical Review Committee of the Faculty of Dental Sciences. The survey was conducted during a study period within the routine teaching time at the end of the three-month English language course. Abuse or harassment was defined, as "treating in a harmful, injurious or offensive way; to attack in words; to speak harshly and insultingly to or

about a person.³³ The students checked (✓) in the appropriate boxes in the questionnaire to report anonymously any mistreatment or abuse they had experienced. Data were entered and analysed using SPSS Version 16 (SPSS inc., USA). Prevalence and 95% confidence interval for extent, type and severity of mistreatment were quantified.

Results

A total of 65 students (91.5% of the year entrants) submitted completed questionnaires. The group comprised 44 (67.7%) females and 21 (32.3%) males, one of whom was married.

Verbal/Emotional Abuse

Approximately half of the respondents indicated that they experienced some form of verbal abuse with *yelling or shouting* being the predominant form of verbal abuse. While a third of the students reported that they were *intentionally ignored* or were *made to feel clearly unwelcome and unwanted*, 13% stated the harassment as *racial or ethnic discrimination*. Similar proportions of students stated that they *tried to avoid situations or activities that could make them remember the abuse* ((28.8%) or *had repeated upsetting memories of the event* (26.9%). Approximately two thirds (66.0%, $p < 0.04$) had stated that they *had discussed the incidents with family or close friends*, while a smaller number of students (22%) had *done nothing about the incidents*.

Sexual Mistreatment

Unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, hurtful remarks about body, dress, age, or hurtful comments or gossip

about sexual preferences or habits constituted the main form of mistreatment of a sexual nature, as reported by 18% ($p < 0.01$) of the students. There was no appreciable difference in the number of incidents reported between male and female students.

Physical Abuse

The proportion of students indicating that they experienced some form of physical abuse was relatively small (9.5%, $p < 0.069$). Being slapped, hit, punched or kicked and pushed, shoved, shaken or tripped and objects thrown at the student had been indicated as the types of abuse experienced.

Categories of persons responsible for mistreatment

While approximately a quarter of the respondents had stated that male students in 3rd Year or above had inflicted some of mistreatment on them, a fair proportion of the new entrants had implicated 3rd Year female students or female instructors (27.6% of the incidents) as the source of mistreatment.

Discussion

At least half the group surveyed had experienced some form mistreatment, with verbal or emotional abuse being more frequent than sexual or physical abuse. This finding is similar to the observations reported in other studies.²⁰

A point worth noting is that 85% of the respondents had stated that they did not suffer ethnic or racial discrimination. This may be seen as a positive feature in the present university environment, especially in

view of the ethnic and racial issues that had attracted considerable publicity as a result of the developments in Sri Lanka during the recent past.

The subjects in our study appear not to have been subjected to mistreatment of a sexual nature to an appreciable extent when compared with the findings in previous investigations.²⁰ This occurrence may be related to the cultural inhibitions that may still exist in the South Asian context.

The fact that the students had not been subjected to severe physical abuse contrasts sharply with the perception that the average reader of the national media may have following reports of extreme maltreatment. Although no harassment of any sort could be condoned, the finding that that physical abuse of the new students is not widespread is encouraging.

On the whole, many of the students surveyed did not seem to consider the harassment that they faced to be of an extent that had a deleterious effect on their studies or general well being. Some students had even stated that the encounters enabled them to get to know the senior students better.

Conclusion

New entrants to the undergraduate course in Dental Surgery had suffered a certain degree of mistreatment at the hands of the senior students. While the harassment mostly constituted verbal or emotional abuse,

sexual or physical mistreatment had not occurred to any appreciable extent. The severity and the prevalence of harassment appear to be somewhat less intensive than that the media reports may lead one to conclude. It is important that the university administration implements measures that jointly involve the new entrants and the senior students in productive ventures.

References

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